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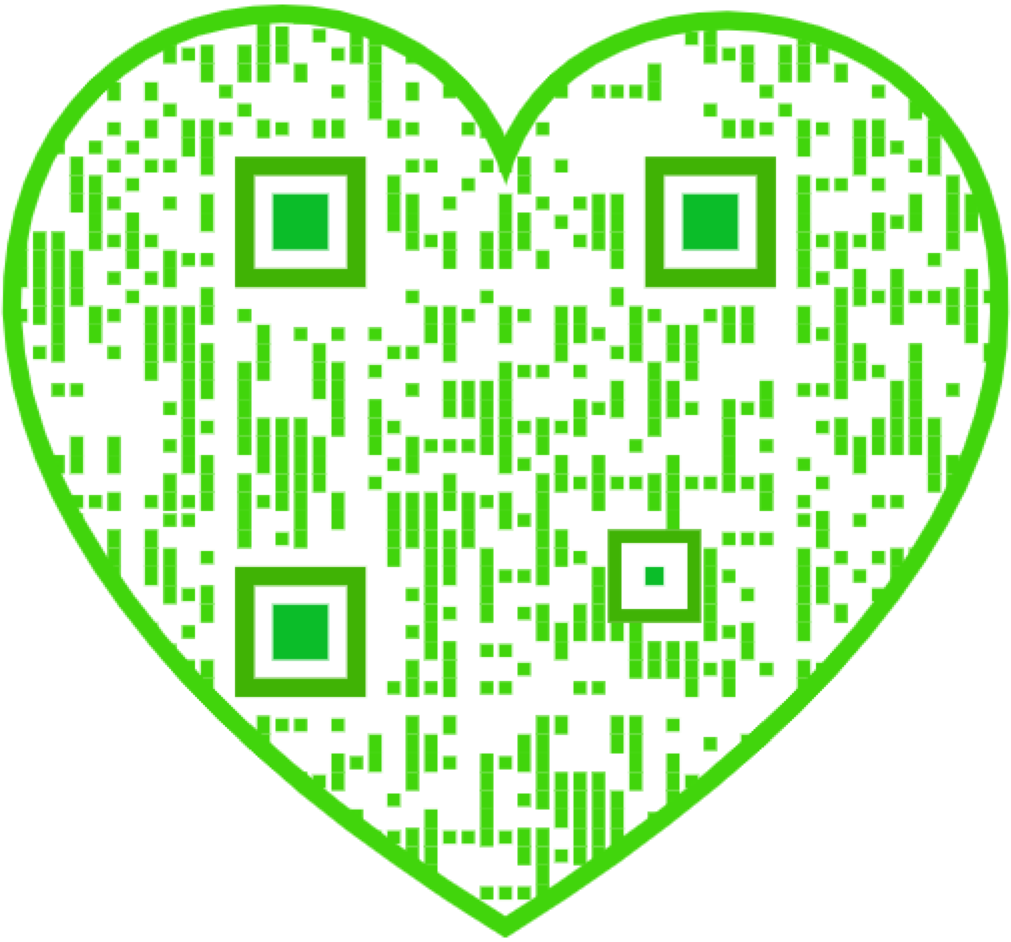

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Northern cardinal
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BACK COVER: ANDY RAUPP

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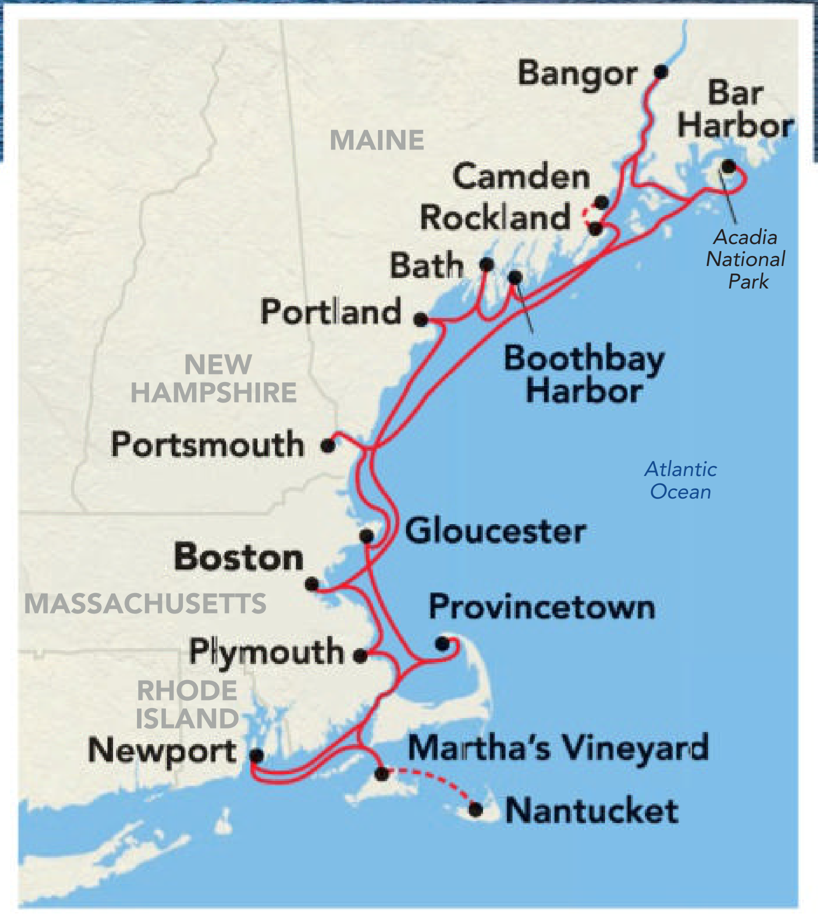
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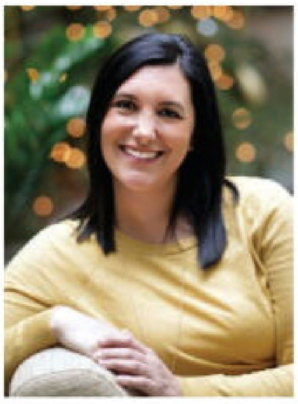
FROM THE EDITOR

Growing Indoors



Besides more than 15 pages of beautiful winter bird photos, this issue is full of helpful hints about indoor gardening for those looking for ways to nurture a green thumb inside. I wish I had some sage advice to insert here, but my own houseplants are barely hanging on.

In "Grow This, Not That" on page 34, garden writer Luke Miller shares his thoughts on which houseplants are worth skipping—and which you might want to try instead. I will definitely avoid the fussy plants he talks about and stick to the more forgiving ones should I ever decide to expand my collection.

If you are a pet owner, be sure to read "Houseplant Hazards" on page 18 before buying any new additions. The four mentioned may be dangerous for your furry friends.

And in "Bring the Outdoors In" on page 40, learn how to make your own terrarium. I'd love to see your take on it. Share your finished project with us at *birdsandblooms.com/submit*.

Kirsten

KIRSTEN SCHRADER, CONTENT DIRECTOR

LOVE TO SEE IT

"Nature has unique ways of saying thank you. I was outside filling my feeder when I saw this heart made by birds in the snow!" **Julie Johnson** Saint Augusta, MN

CROWN A WINNER

We need your help! Turn to page 45 to see the 12 finalists in our annual photo contest. Then head to our website at *birdsandblooms.com/contests* to vote for your favorite in each of our three categories.

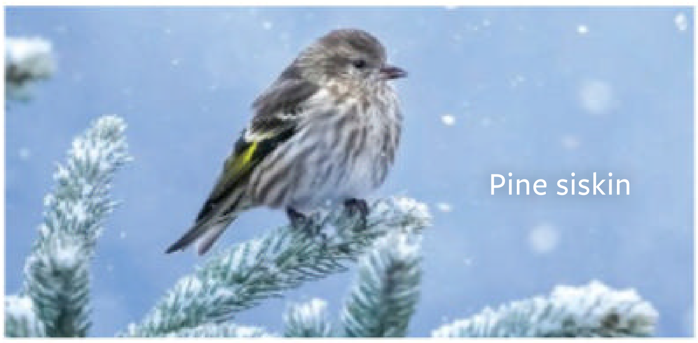
BECOME A FIELD EDITOR!

We're growing our exclusive *Birds & Blooms* Field Editor group. To learn more about the benefits and requirements of the program, visit *birdsandblooms.com/fieldeditors*. The application window closes Jan. 31, 2025.

CONTRIBUTOR SPOTLIGHT

Andy Raupp has had more than 20 bird photos published in our pages since 2019. When asked why he loves bird photography, Andy says, "I'm fascinated by all the different species and how they come in so many shapes, sizes and colors. Between songbirds, owls, ducks and all the others, there is always something fun to see and photograph."

Thanks, Andy, for sharing your beautiful work with us (see one of his photos below)! We accept photo submissions anytime at *birdsandblooms.com/submit*.



Pine siskin

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A Festive Treat

This houseplant is the gift that keeps on giving

COULANGES/SHUTTERSTOCK

A PLANT WITH MANY NAMES

Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter cactuses may all be known as holiday cactus. The three are very similar, but they flower at various times and have different stem segment spikiness.

Holiday Cactus

Schlumbergera truncata

With long, flat, flashy stems and showstopping flowers in shades of pink, purple, white and red, this cactus is a long-lasting houseplant that can blossom long after the holidays are over. Just keep it in a consistently warm spot (70 to 80 degrees) during the bloom season.

Light needs: Bright, indirect.

Size: 6 to 12 inches tall and 12 to 24 inches wide.

Grown for: Showy blooms.

Water needs: Water when top few inches of soil begins to dry.

Growing tip: Minimize changes in environment to avoid bud and flower drop.

Brown-headed nuthatch

Social and Supportive

Brown-headed nuthatches take a helpful approach to raising their young **BY MONICA CORDOZA**

Whether foraging atop trees or nesting in low snags, brown-headed nuthatches are often chattering with one another in the mature pine forests of the southeastern United States.

"It's a coordinated back-and-forth between group members until they come across a group of neighboring nuthatches. Then all hell breaks loose as they defend their space against the other group," says Jim Cox, a biologist at Tall Timbers, a research station and land conservancy in Tallahassee, Florida.

Early Nesters

These year-round residents mate for life, and start building cavity nests in early February while snakes are hibernating, Jim says. "They're easy prey for snakes, which basically shimmy up the tree and take the young and sometimes the female."

Both sexes look for a dead tree or snag, typically a pine but sometimes a deciduous tree or fence post near a pine forest. "They look for soft dead trees in the last stages of decay," Jim says. Nests consists of grass, bark fibers, hair, feathers and pine seed wings.

Staying Put

These tree climbers defend territories of up to 5 acres, and produce four to six eggs, which the female incubates for about 14 days.

Young may fledge in about 18 days, but some fledglings stick around—a behavior known as cooperative breeding. It is mostly males that remain for a year or two, helping their parents build a nest and feeding the incubating female or the new nestlings. "If there's a vacancy next door, they'll take over that territory," Jim says, who estimates cooperative breeding increases the chances of nesting success from 45% to 60%.

Singing a Different Tune

These brown-capped songbirds sport a white nape spot and pale off-white underparts. Male and female brown-headed nuthatches look similar. To tell them apart, Jim suggests listening. "Females have a chattery series of staccato notes, while males have a distinct voice that sounds like a squeaky dog toy."

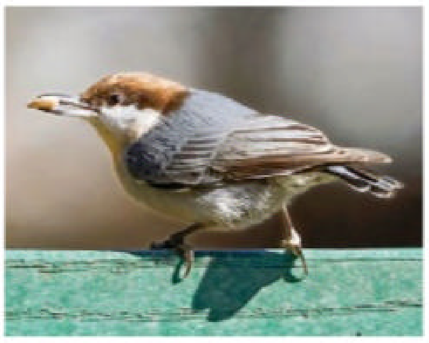
How to Attract Them

If you live in their range, from the Delmarva Peninsula to Florida and east Texas, and are near 5 to 10 acres of mature pine forest, you can attract brown-headed nuthatches with suet and sunflower seeds.

Jim says he's had success with nest boxes. Use a metal excluder attached over the 1½-inch hole on a bluebird box to make the diameter 1⅛ inches and just right for these birds.

AGAMI PHOTO AGENCY/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

THE FEED



"I always wanted a photo of a brown-headed nuthatch, but they are so fast! Once they visited, I parked myself near the feeder with my camera. I was thrilled to finally have a keeper!"

Kimberly Miskiewicz
RALEIGH, NC

LOOKING THEIR BEST

Family members frequently groom one another in a highly social behavior called allopreening.

DOWNWARD WALKERS

In addition to climbing up trees, brown-headed nuthatches can maneuver headfirst down, finding insects in bark crevices missed by upward-only climbing birds, such as woodpeckers.

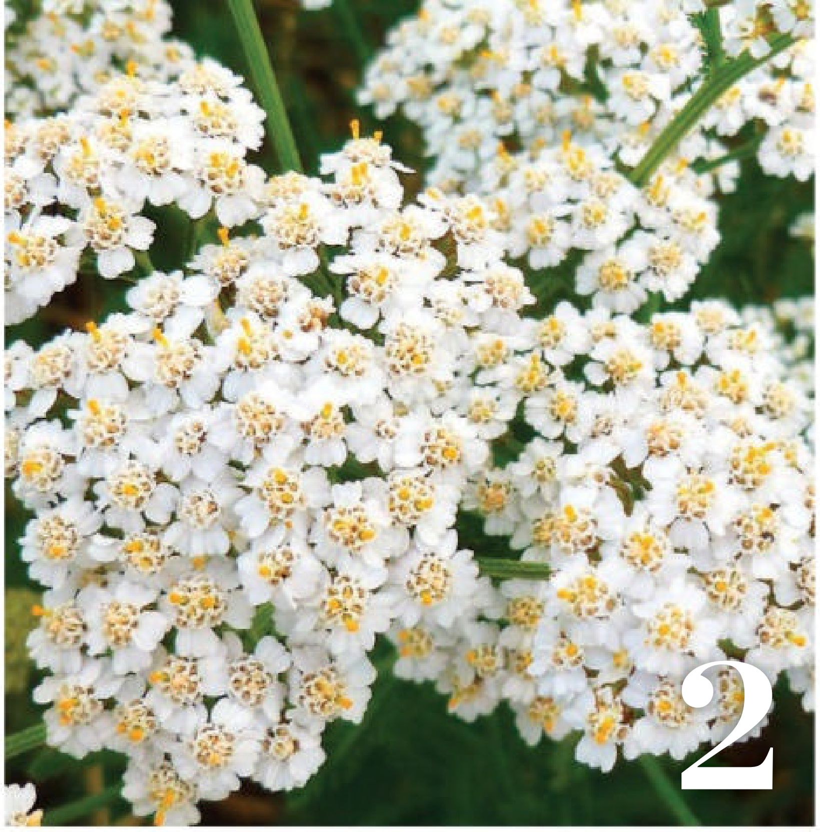
TOOL TIME

These clever birds use their chisel-like beaks to pry off pieces of bark, which they use to dig beneath flakes of bark searching for insects.

TOP 10

Rooted in Resilience

These hardy perennials will thrive in most zones **BY JODI HELMER**



1 Giant allium

ALLIUM GIGANTEUM
ZONES 5 TO 8

A softball-sized cluster of star-shaped purple florets atop a thick, naked stem grows up to 6 inches in diameter and creates a stunning focal point in the garden. Plant bulbs in full sun and medium to well draining soil. The so-called giant onions have leaves and stalks that smell like the pungent veggie but aren't edible.

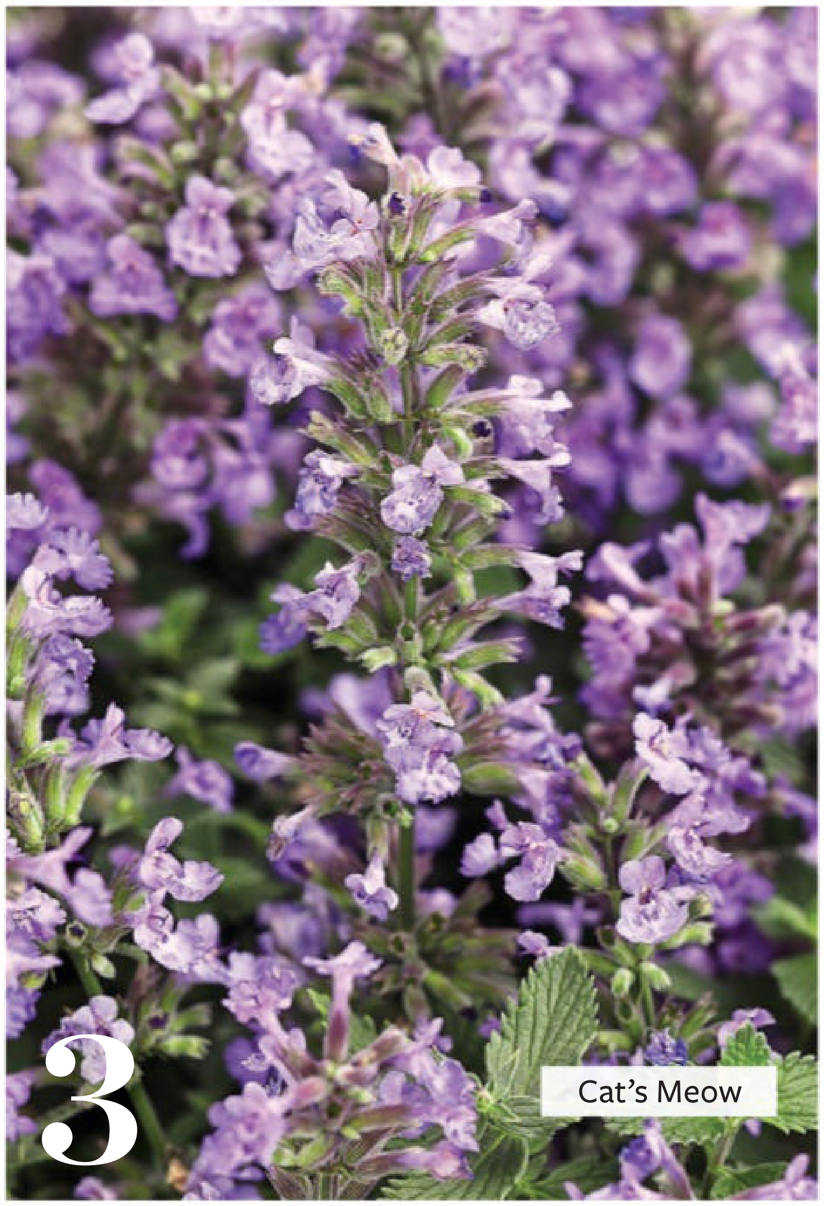
Why we love it: Flowers bloom in late spring and can be cut or dried for floral arrangements.

2 Yarrow

ACHILLEA MILLEFOLIUM
ZONES 3 TO 9

Once a medicinal plant, common yarrow evolved into a popular perennial after it was brought to the United States from Europe. Flattened clusters of tiny flowers top stems covered in fernlike, aromatic foliage that retains its spicy scent in dried arrangements. This yarrow spreads, but you can snip spent blooms and remove new sprouts.

Why we love it: Butterflies, bees and other pollinators frequently visit yarrow.



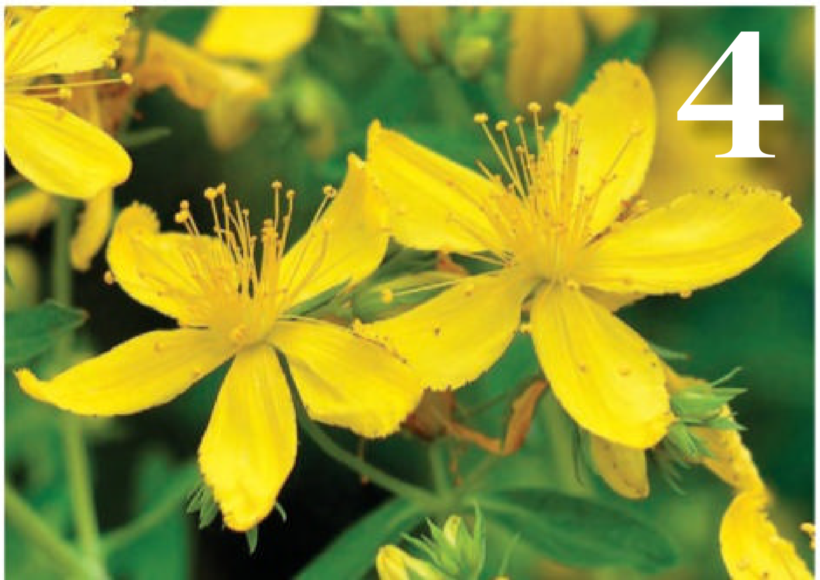
3 Catmint

NEPETA, ZONES 3 TO 8

Petite lavender-blue blooms dot the entire length of the stem and last from May through September, to the delight of insect pollinators. Cutting flower spikes after the initial bloom promotes continuous flowering. Catmint may become weedy, but you can select clumping varieties that do not readily reseed.

Why we love it: Catmint is a fragrant, low-maintenance perennial that thrives in dry soils.

DIVIDE AND CONQUER *Fall is the best time to divide perennials because plants have stored sufficient energy to recover from transplant stress. Transplant at least six weeks before the first frost to give plants enough time to get established before winter.*



4 St. John's wort

HYPERICUM PERFORATUM, ZONES 3 TO 8

Since ancient times, these plants have been used as an herbal medicine. Star-shaped yellow flowers with black dots on the edges of the petals appear in June and last through August. One plant can produce up to 100,000 seeds a year, and seeds can last up to 10 years in the soil!

Why we love it: Perennials can grow up to 3 feet tall and naturalize via runners or prolific self-seeding.

1: SHAPENCOLOUR/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; 2: SUNBUNNY STUDIO/SHUTTERSTOCK; 3: WWW.PROVENWINNERS.COM; 4: YULIIA BILOUSOVA/GETTY IMAGES

5 Blanket flower

GAILLARDIA X GRANDIFLORA,
ZONES 3 TO 10

Crossing annual and perennial varieties of gaillardia led to this perennial with a longer bloom period. Grow in full sun and watch birds and butterflies enjoy rich red and orange blooms from May through September. Since it can be short-lived, skip deadheading and allow it to self-seed.

Why we love it: Goldfinches flock to the seeds in the spent flower heads in the fall.

6 Salvia

SALVIA OFFICINALIS,
ZONES 4 TO 8

Commonly known as sage, the culinary herb, salvia plants have a sprawling growth pattern and can grow up to 2½ feet tall and just as wide. The aromatic gray-green leaves can be used fresh or dried.

Why we love it: Salvia produces long-lasting, showy whorls of lavender-blue flowers in late spring, making it valuable as an ornamental pollinator magnet.

7
Rainbow Rhythm
Ruby Spider

7 Ruby Spider daylily

HEMEROCALLIS HYBRID, ZONES 3 TO 9

This award-winning daylily is beloved for its large ruby red petals with vibrant yellow throats. Mature plants grow 34 inches tall and spread up to 24 inches; the massive petals are 9 inches long. In mass plantings, the early summer blooms create a striking floral display that attracts bees, hummingbirds and other pollinators.

Why we love it: Daylilies are well suited to harsh conditions from drought and poor soils to pollution.

SMART PICKS *You know your yard best, so be sure to select plants that are suited for the specific growing conditions of your yard. If you have your heart set on a perennial that does better in a warmer zone, consider trying to grow it as an annual instead.*

8
My Fair Lady

8 Hosta

HOSTA, ZONES 3 TO 9

Hostas are prized for their ability to add lush foliage to the landscape. The low-maintenance, shade-loving perennials are available in countless varieties with ornamental leaves ranging from blue-green to gold to variegated patterns and some can spread up to 70 inches wide.

Why we love it: Their ability to thrive in low light makes them shade staples.

5: PETER MOOIJ/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; 6: IVA VAGNEROVA/SHUTTERSTOCK; 7: WWW.PROVENWINNERS.COM; 8: WALTERS GARDENS, INC

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FEELING REJUVENATED

Everyone feels aging pain, but CBD can help you deal with it

By: Beth Giles

Life really does fly by. Before I knew it, my 70s had arrived, and with them came some new gifts from dear ol' Mother Nature—frequent knee pain, stress, low energy and sleeplessness. Now, I'm a realist about these things, I knew I wasn't going to be young and springy forever. But still, with "golden years" nearly on my doorstep, I couldn't help but feel a little cheated. That is until I found my own secret weapon. Another gift from Mother Nature.

It began a few months back when I was complaining about my aches and pains to my marathon-running granddaughter, Jen. She casually mentioned how she uses CBD oil to help with her joint pain. She said that CBD gave her more focus and clarity throughout the day and that her lingering muscle and joint discomfort no longer bothered her. She even felt comfortable signing up for back-to-back marathons two weekends in a row this year. That made even this self-proclaimed skeptic take notice.

But I still had some concerns. According to one study in the Journal of the American Medical Association, 70% of CBD products didn't contain the amount of CBD stated on their labels. And, as a consumer, that's terrifying!

If I was going to try CBD, I needed to trust the source through and through. My two-fold research process naturally led me to Zebra CBD.

First, I started calling my family and friends. Call me old fashioned but I wanted to know if there were people whom I trusted (more than anonymous testimonials) who've had success using CBD besides my granddaughter.

Secondly, I wanted cold hard facts. Diving deep into the world of CBD research and clinical studies, I came across Emily Gray M.D., a physician at the University of California at San Diego (UCSD) Medical School and medical advisor to Zebra CBD who is researching the effects of CBD. Dr. Gray wrote "early results with CBD have been promising and we have a lot of research underway now. I've had several patients using CBD with good success. It's important that you know your source of CBD and how to use it properly."

After hearing it from the doctor's mouth, I returned to my research, asking more people and was amazed by the number of close friends and family who were already on the CBD train. Apparently, I was the only one without a clue! And funny enough, a couple of friends who commented were using the same brand as my granddaughter—Zebra CBD. There was no consensus as to why they were using CBD, but the top reasons given were for muscle & joint discomfort, mood support, sleep support, stress and headaches, as well as supporting overall health & wellness.

Eventually, even the most skeptical of the bunch can be won over. With a trusted CBD source in mind, I decided to give it a go.

When I viewed Zebra CBD's selection online, I was impressed by its array of products, including CBD oils called tinctures, topicals, chewable tablets, mints and gummies. After reading on their website that all their products are made with organically-grown hemp, I ordered... and it arrived within 2 days!

The first product I tried was the Rub. Now this stuff was strong. Immediately after rubbing it on my knee, the soothing effects kicked in. It had that familiar menthol cooling effect, which I personally find very relieving. And the best part is, after two weeks of using it, my knee pain no longer affected my daily mobility.

The Zebra Mint Oil, on the other hand, had a different but equally positive effect on my body. To take it, the instructions suggest holding the oil in your mouth for about 30 seconds. This was simple enough, and the mint taste was, well, minty. After about 15 minutes, a sense of calm came over my body. It's hard to describe exactly. It's more like an overall sense of relaxation—as if I just walked out of a spa, and now I'm ready to seize the day. Needless to say, I've really enjoyed the oil.

While it hasn't been a catch-all fix to every one of my health issues, it has eased the level and frequency of my aches. And it sure doesn't seem like a coincidence how much calmer and more focused I am.

All-in-all, CBD is one of those things that you have to try for yourself. Although I was skeptical at first, I can safely say that I'm now a Zebra CBD fan and that I highly recommend their products.

Also, I managed to speak with a Zebra CBD spokesperson willing to provide an exclusive. If you order this month, you'll receive $10 off your first order by using promo code "**BB10**" at checkout. Plus, the company offers a 100% No-Hassle, Money-Back Guarantee. You can try it yourself and order Zebra CBD at ZebraCBD.com/BB or at 1-888-762-2699.

9 Black-eyed Susan

RUDBECKIA HIRTA, ZONES 3 TO 10

The low-maintenance native wildflower thrives in wooded areas and prairies. Stems grow up to 3 feet tall in full sun and bright-yellow to orange flowers with domed, dark brown centers bloom from June to September. Depending on your location and the cultivar, it may act as an annual, biennial or perennial.

Why we love it: It can easily be grown from seed and blooms the first year it's planted.

MORE HARDY PICKS

These colorful, low-maintenance options are sure to please

- Russian sage (*Perovskia atriplicifolia*)
- Hardy ageratum (*Eupatorium coelestinum*)
- Mexican petunia (*Ruellia simplex*)

Pardon My Cerise
10

10 Bee balm

MONARDA SPP., ZONES 3 TO 9

Its leaves were once used as a balm for bee stings, giving the plant its moniker. Flowers in shades of red, white, pink, lavender and purple appear in summer and attract pollinators. Plant in full sun and deadhead to encourage reblooming.

Why we love it: It's a member of the mint family and produces fragrant (and edible) foliage.

Jodi Helmer is a North Carolina writer and gardener who dreams of having her shady front yard filled with variegated hostas.

9: BAILEY-COOPER PHOTOGRAPHY/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; 10: WWW.PROVENWINNERS.COM

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Lettuce is one of the easiest crops to grow hydroponically indoors.

Basics of Hydroponics

Use these top tips and plant picks to have a successful soil-free garden

BY MARLA CIMINI

Hydroponic gardening is a method for growing plants without soil, indoors or outside. The plants get nutrients directly through water. Benefits include higher yields and fewer pests (no soil for pests to hide in!).

Whether starting with a hydroponic garden kit or DIYing your own system, choosing the best plants for hydroponics helps set beginners up for success. Here are some things to consider.

Start Small

"It's wise to focus on growing one easy vegetable first, such as lettuce, and learning that well before attempting to expand and grow a variety of different plants," says Cris Tuhy, co-owner of Sweetleaf Farm, an Andover, New Jersey, farm that grows a multitude of hydroponic produce. "You will get a sense of accomplishment and have a higher success rate overall."

Skip Underground Growers

Avoid root vegetables such as potatoes, onions and carrots, which generally require soil to thrive. Many different foods can be grown in a hydroponic garden. Microgreens are among the easiest plants to grow. Leafy greens and lettuces are also good choices.

GAP PHOTOS/JOHN SWITHINBANK

GET STARTED WITH HYDROPONICS

It's possible to build your own hydroponic growing system, but brands such as Gardyn and Rise Gardens offer ready-to-go systems in various sizes, colors and price points. Etsy is another great place to find a ready-made kit to get you growing.

Consider Size

Think ahead about how big the plant you're considering is destined to become. Just as in soil-based gardening, the bigger the plant, the more precious space it requires, and overcrowding plants can lead to a disappointing yield.

Best Plant Picks

Beans. "Even novice gardeners probably know that you can grow beans without much effort, just about anywhere," says dedicated hydroponic gardener Vicki Liston of New Mexico. "They will even sprout in a wet paper towel. So obviously, they are super easy to grow hydroponically." Just keep in mind that they'll need some support eventually. (Vicki recommends string.) To get started with beans, consider fast-growing bush beans. They're easy because they don't grow as tall as pole beans.

Tomatoes. Growing tomatoes hydroponically is a much faster method than growing them in a traditional garden, which has made them one of the most popular hydroponic plants.

"I don't have a lot of patience, so my advice is don't plant them from seed," Vicki says. "Instead use small starter plants, and you should be able to harvest relatively quickly, in about eight to 10 weeks." Note that you'll need to support the vines as they grow vertically.

Lettuce. It doesn't require a lot of attention, making it a great choice for new hydroponic gardeners. Harvest the outer leaves (known as cut and come again harvesting) to encourage the plant to keep growing.

"I suggest trying Rex Butterhead lettuce because the seeds are coated and pelleted, which makes them easy to handle and plant," Cris says. "It's a fast grower and will be ready to harvest in six to eight weeks."

Green onions. "If you want to boost your confidence as a hydroponic farmer, grow green onions! They're by far the easiest vegetable I've ever grown," Vicki says. "You can just cut the root off an onion you bought at a grocery store, place it in your hydroponic system, and they will grow like crazy." Regrowing kitchen scraps minimizes waste and saves money.

Strawberries. "Strawberries are one of our top favorites because they grow well in a vertical garden and can produce quite a bit of fruit in a small space," Cris says. Plus, if your setup is indoors, you can enjoy these sweet berries no matter the season.

Herbs. Herbs of all types are known to work especially well in hydroponic systems because they're resilient. Keep your indoor herb garden growing near your kitchen, for easy incorporation in dishes and drinks.

"You can keep harvesting these herbs over and over, and they grow thicker and fuller over time," Vicki says. "Be sure to cut off their flowers as soon as they appear, to keep them healthy." Mint and basil are two of her favorites.

Spinach. This leafy vegetable is delicious, nutritious and does incredibly well when raised hydroponically—a friendly crop for amateurs. Plus, it produces a continuous harvest and grows fast. Spinach may be harvest-ready in 30 to 40 days.

FLOKI/SHUTTERSTOCK

Houseplant Hazards

Learn four common houseplants to keep away from pets

BY KARUNA EBERL

ALOE VERA

The latex in aloe vera leaves is mildly to moderately toxic to dogs and cats. When pets eat the yellow inner skin, it commonly causes diarrhea because of the anthraquinone glycosides it contains. Other symptoms include severe dehydration, vomiting, changes in urine color, lethargy, depression and anorexia.

JADE PLANT

Another poisonous succulent, jade can cause upset digestive systems in dogs and cats. Symptoms can include lethargy, vomiting, depression and stumbling. Usually it's not serious, though, and they'll get better on their own. Other succulents commonly toxic to pets include many in the *Euphorbia* genus.

DIEFFENBACHIA

Chewing on dieffenbachia causes immediate pain and swelling in pets' mouths because of the calcium oxalate crystals in the plant tissue. Other symptoms include drooling, vomiting, difficulty swallowing, respiratory distress and pawing at the mouth. Extreme cases can be fatal, so consult poison control or a vet promptly.

PEACE LILY

Like dieffenbachia, peace lilies also cause pain and swelling when munched on. They, too, contain calcium oxalate crystals, as do many other common houseplants in the Araceae family, including monstera, caladium, pothos and philodendron. Also watch out for the sap, which can irritate your eyes.

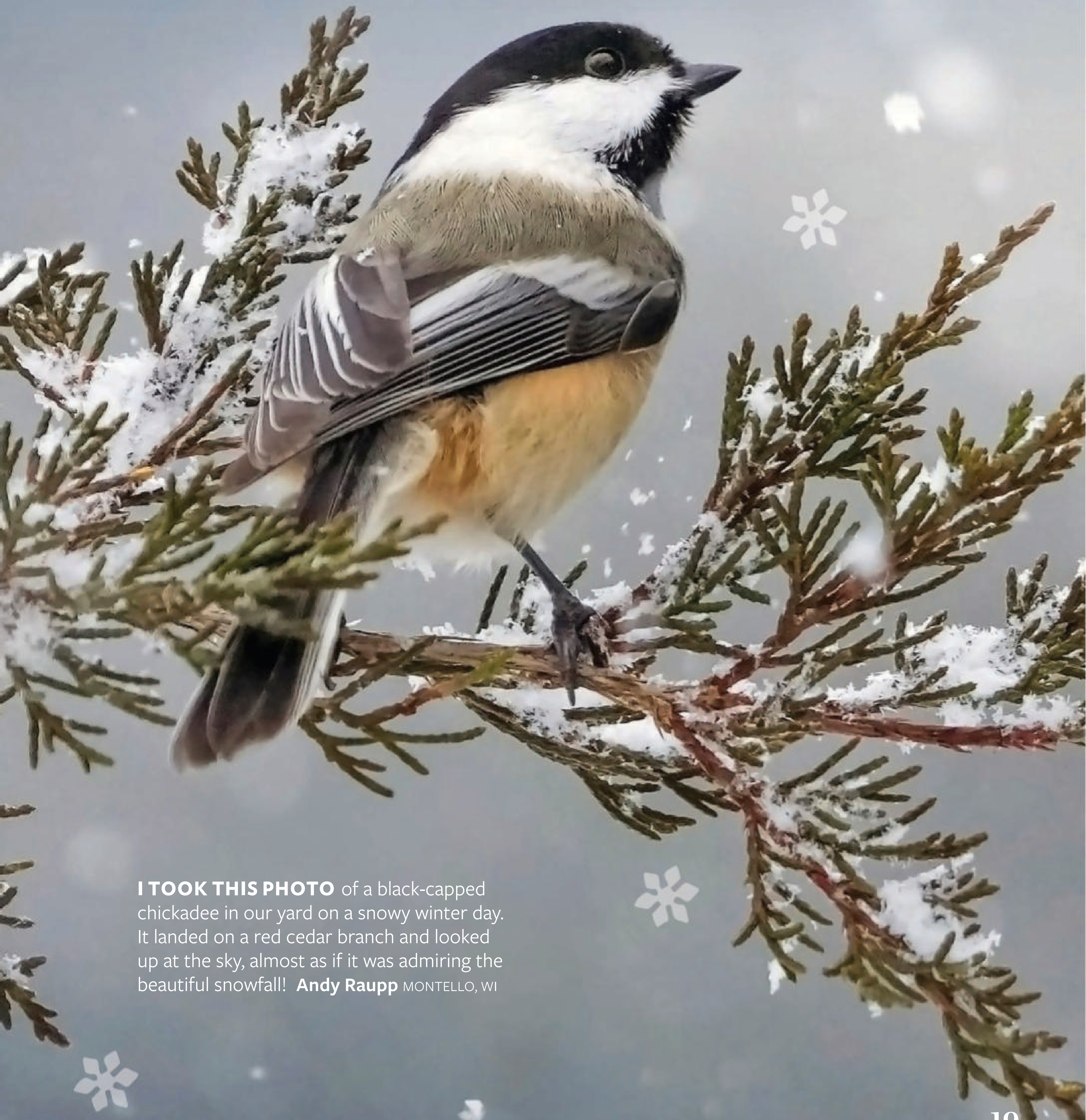
NOTE

Keep pets safe by placing toxic houseplants out of reach. If you suspect they've eaten one, promptly call your vet, the ASPCA Poison Control Center (888) 426-4435, or Poison Control (800) 222-1222. Knowing the scientific name of the plant can also help in these situations.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: LAKSIKA555, MAREN WINTER, LAKSIKA555, TANIAKITURA/SHUTTERSTOCK (4)

Season of Cheer

Readers share the joy of beautiful winter bird sightings



I TOOK THIS PHOTO of a black-capped chickadee in our yard on a snowy winter day. It landed on a red cedar branch and looked up at the sky, almost as if it was admiring the beautiful snowfall! **Andy Raupp** MONTELLO, WI

I DECIDED TO PUT OUT my platform feeder on a frigid December day. This flock of blue jays appeared almost immediately!

Victoria Schwinabart SWANTON, MD

WE HAD JUST RECEIVED our first snowfall of the winter overnight, and this downy woodpecker stopped by for breakfast at my feeder.

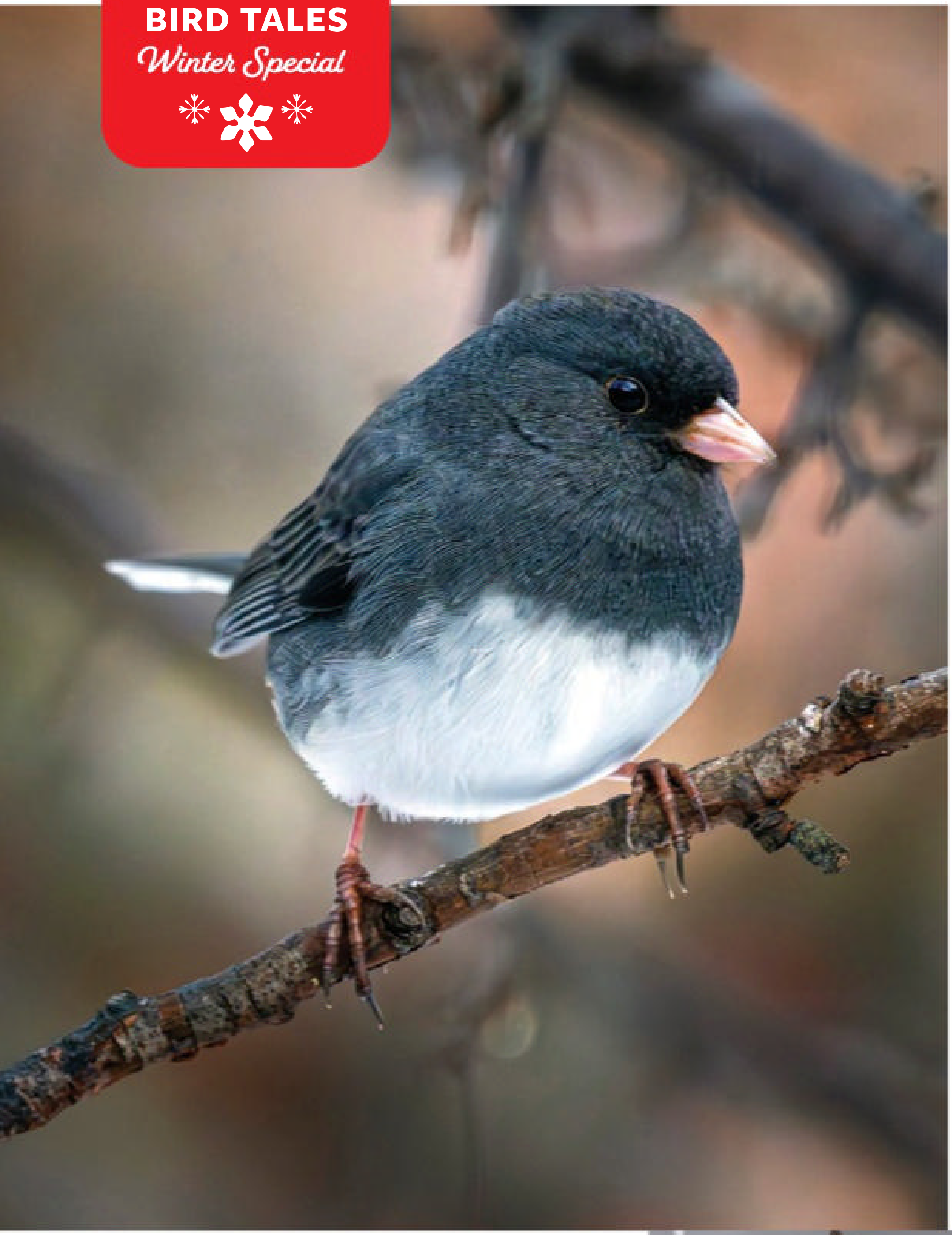
Debbie Parker MEDINA, OH

The Naris Knows

The feathers around a downy woodpecker's nostrils, or nares, protect it from inhaling wood chips as it pecks on trees.

IN THE DEPTHS OF a cold Saskatchewan winter, this crabapple tree, still laden with fruit, provided sustenance for a flock of pine grosbeaks.

Tom Wilson ELBOW, SK

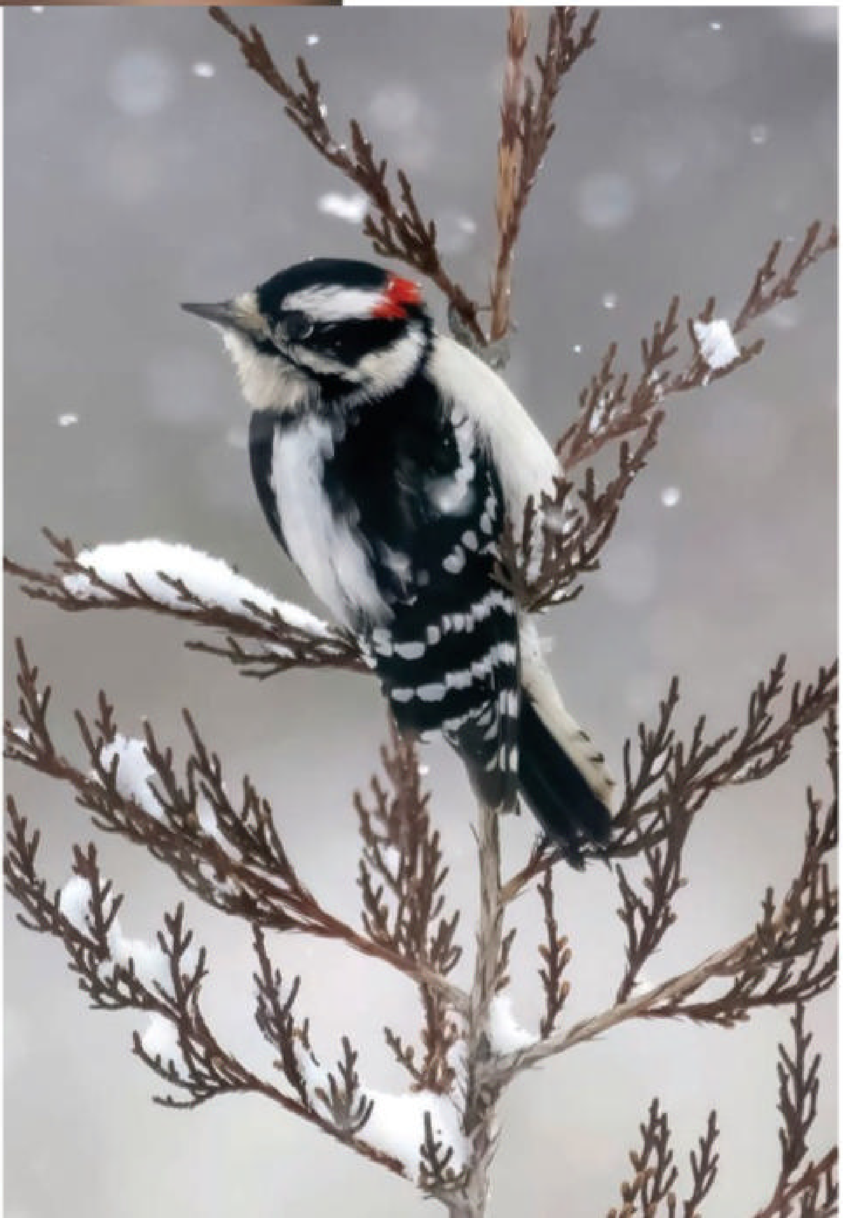


THE DARK-EYED JUNCOS RETURNING to northern Illinois is a welcome sight, and I am always happy to see them when they are back for the winter.

George Giese GRAYSLAKE, IL

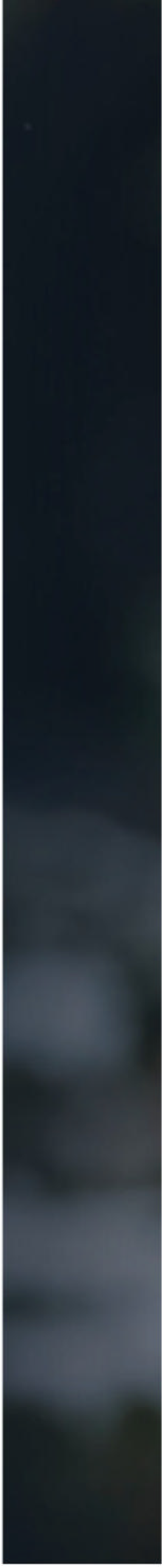
The Junco Census

One of the most common birds of North America, the dark-eyed junco population is estimated to be around 630 million individual birds. That is almost twice the number of people in the United States!

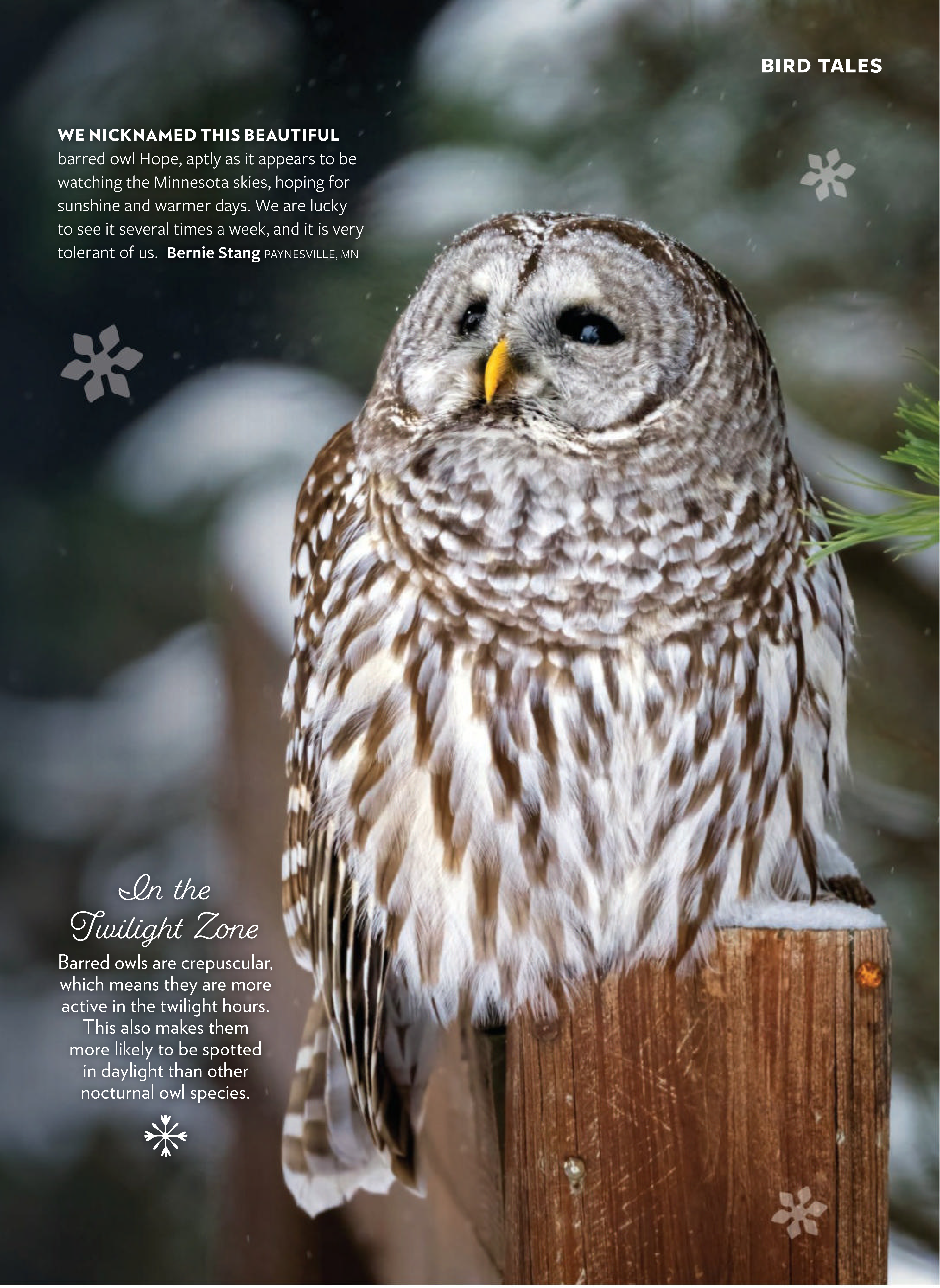


A BEAUTIFUL SNOWY day made for a stunning backdrop for this downy woodpecker in my West Virginia backyard.

Laura Frazier
KEARNEYSVILLE, WV



WE NICKNAMED THIS BEAUTIFUL barred owl Hope, aptly as it appears to be watching the Minnesota skies, hoping for sunshine and warmer days. We are lucky to see it several times a week, and it is very tolerant of us. **Bernie Stang** PAYNESVILLE, MN

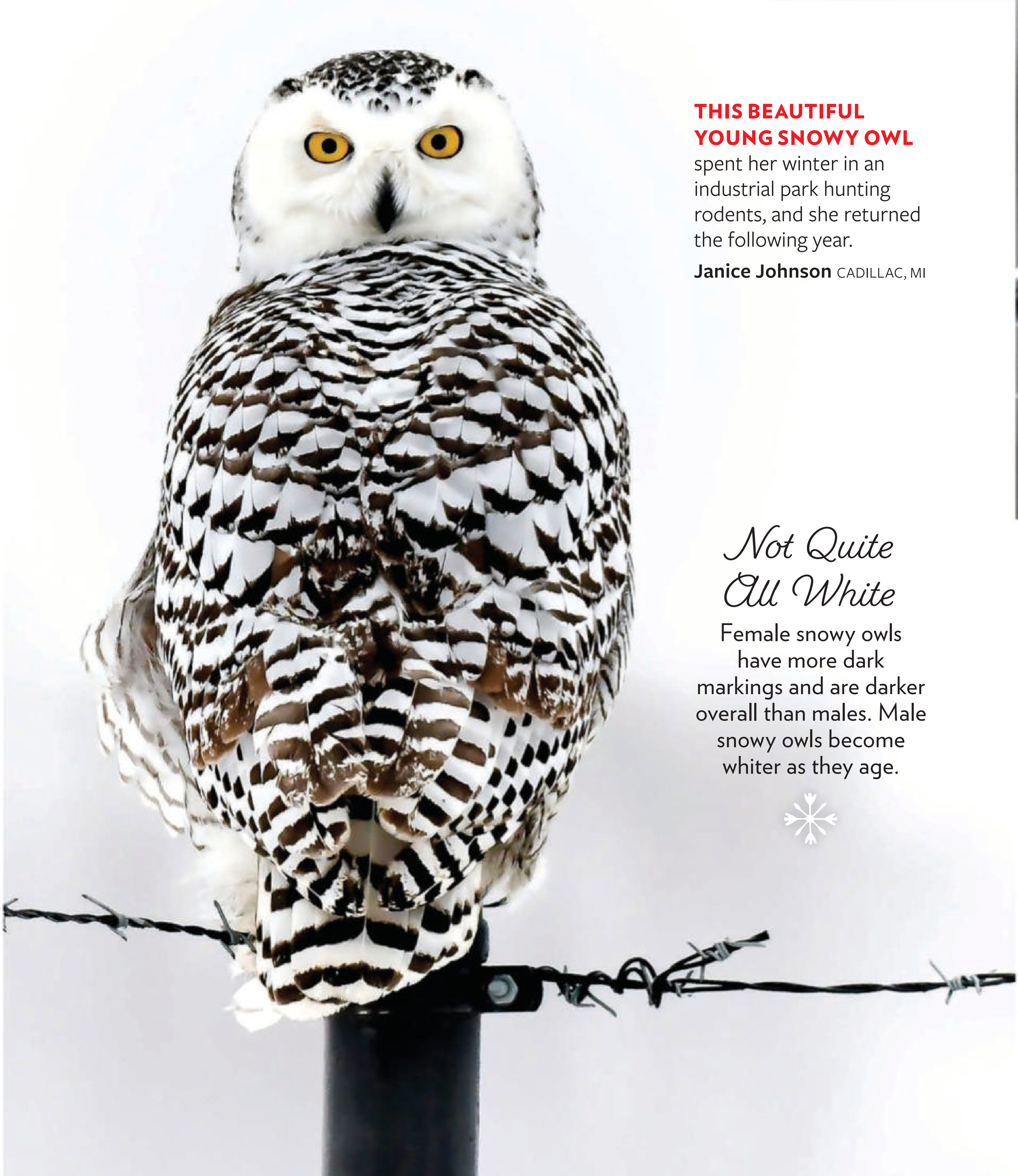


In the Twilight Zone

Barred owls are crepuscular, which means they are more active in the twilight hours. This also makes them more likely to be spotted in daylight than other nocturnal owl species.

SUPERSTITION SAYS THAT CARDINALS appear when angels are near! This handsome male northern cardinal was enjoying the December snow here in Tishomingo, Oklahoma. His vibrant red feathers and the bright white snowflakes make him the perfect poster child for a holiday postcard.

Haley Thomas TISHOMINGO, OK



THIS BEAUTIFUL YOUNG SNOWY OWL spent her winter in an industrial park hunting rodents, and she returned the following year.

Janice Johnson CADILLAC, MI

Not Quite All White

Female snowy owls have more dark markings and are darker overall than males. Male snowy owls become whiter as they age.

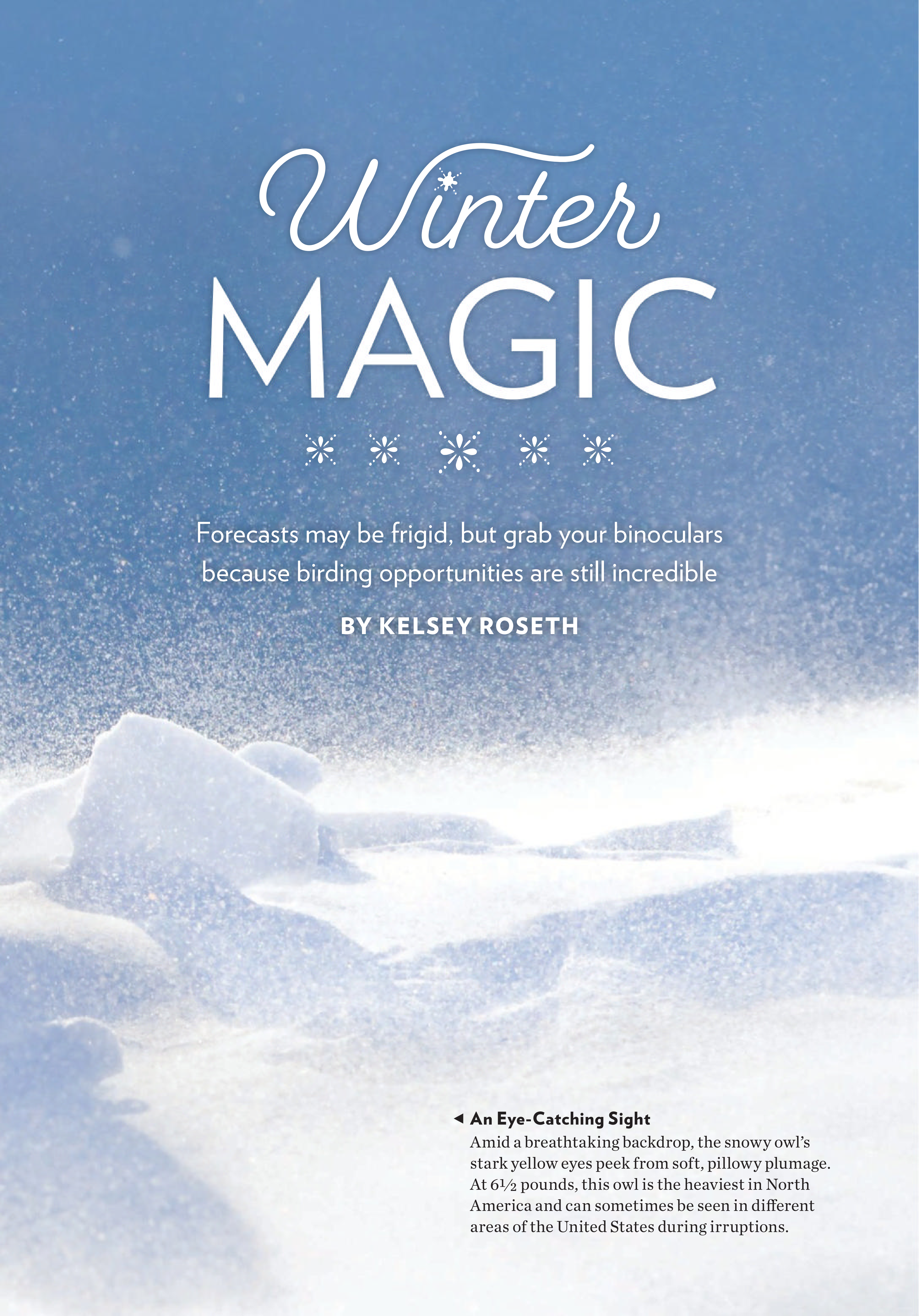
Northerners of the South

The International Ornithological Congress (IOC) World Bird List Project recognizes 19 subspecies of northern cardinal, most of which are found in Mexico.

MENDON PONDS Park in Mendon, New York, allows you to feed the birds! The birds, such as this tufted titmouse, will flock to you, which makes for a great time—and great photos too!

Karissa Cuttino
SAYREVILLE, NJ

MARIE READ



Winter MAGIC

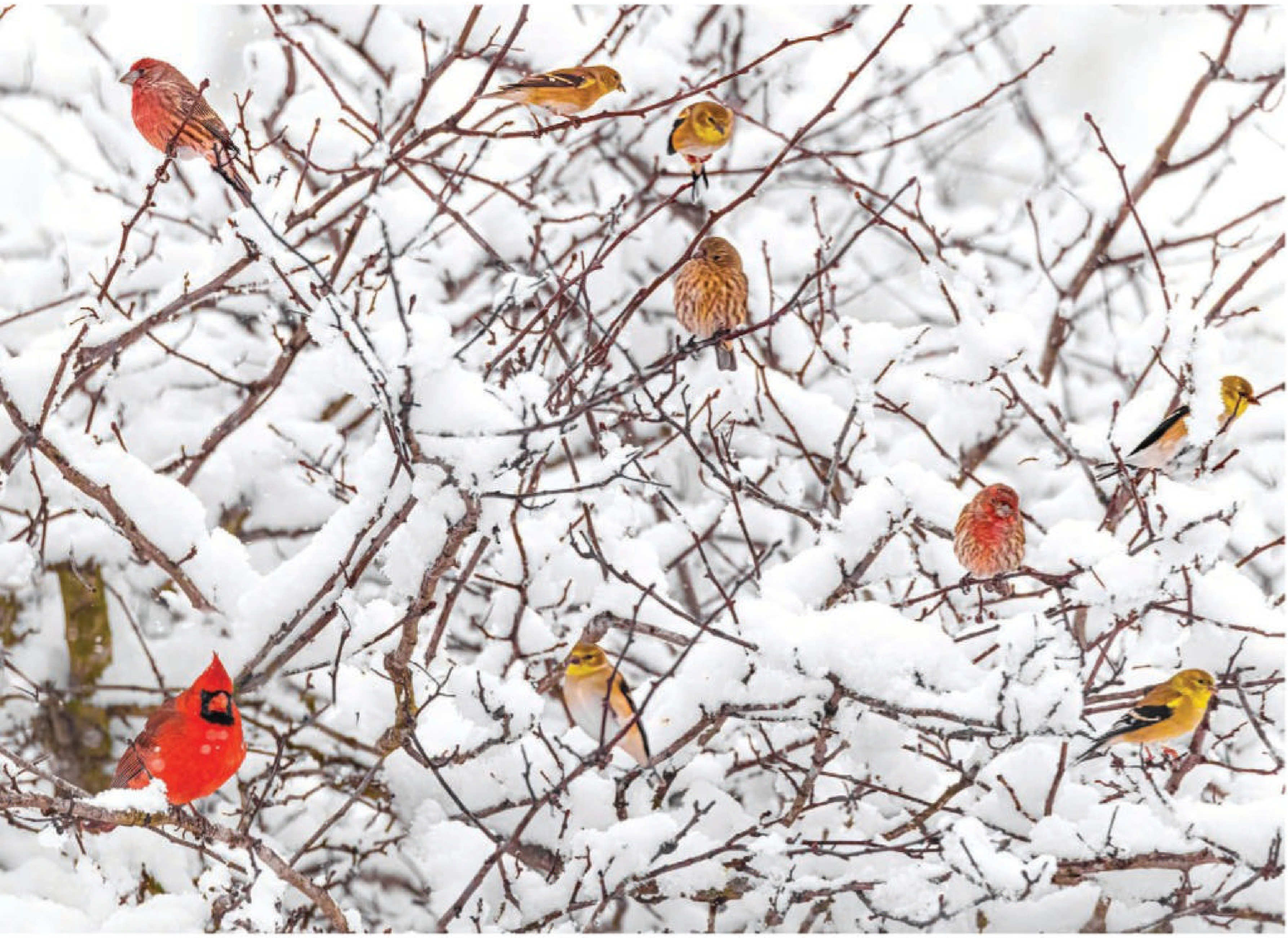
Forecasts may be frigid, but grab your binoculars because birding opportunities are still incredible

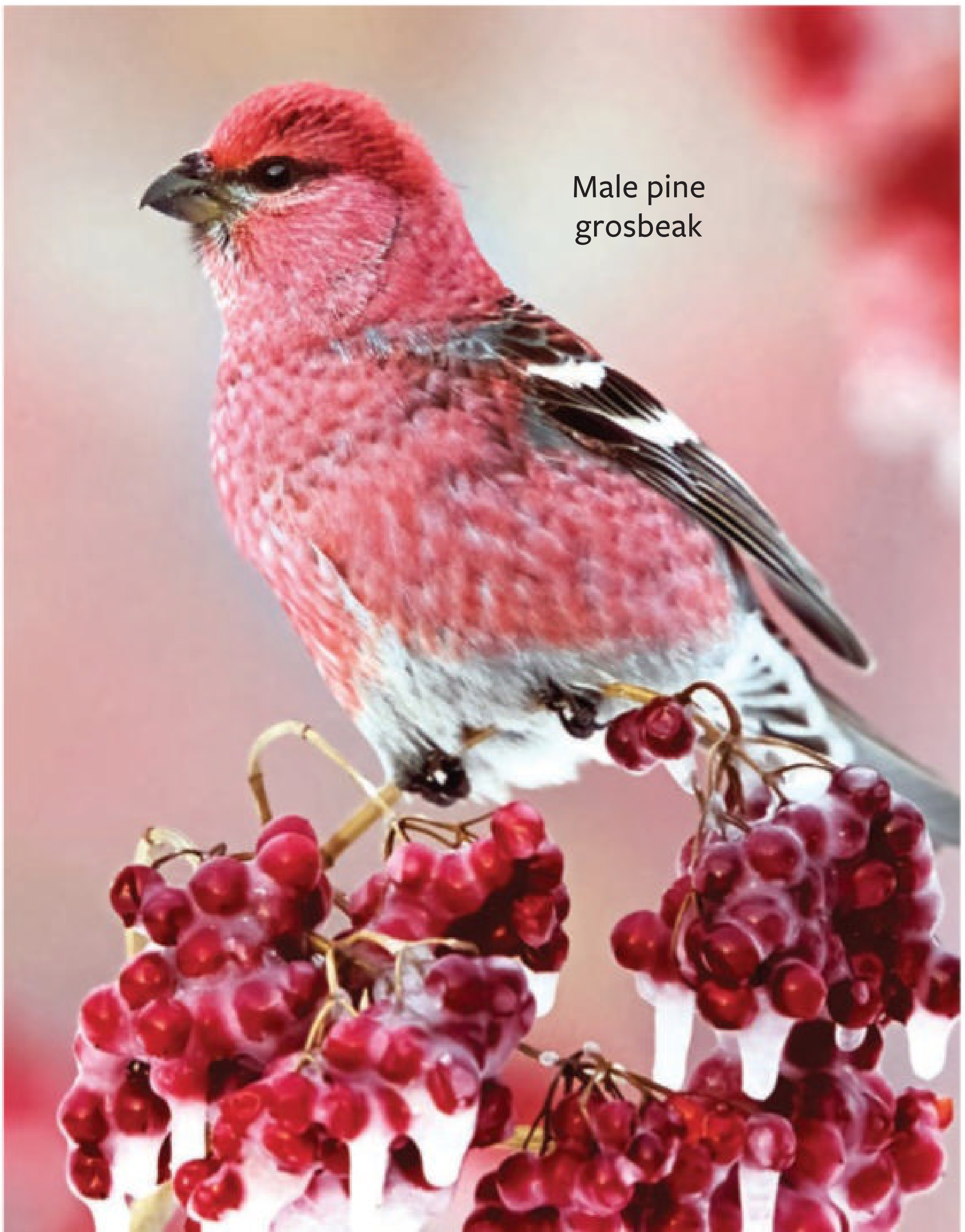
BY KELSEY ROSETH

◄ **An Eye-Catching Sight**
Amid a breathtaking backdrop, the snowy owl's stark yellow eyes peek from soft, pillowy plumage. At 6½ pounds, this owl is the heaviest in North America and can sometimes be seen in different areas of the United States during irruptions.

▲ **Familiar Traveler**
American robins are considered a cheerful sign of spring. However, in winter, they join nomadic flocks—and have been caught in January snacking on crabapples, hawthorns and holly in every U.S. state, aside from Hawaii.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: CHRISTINE HAINES; JAMESBREY/GETTY IMAGES; STEVE AND DAVE MASLOWSKI

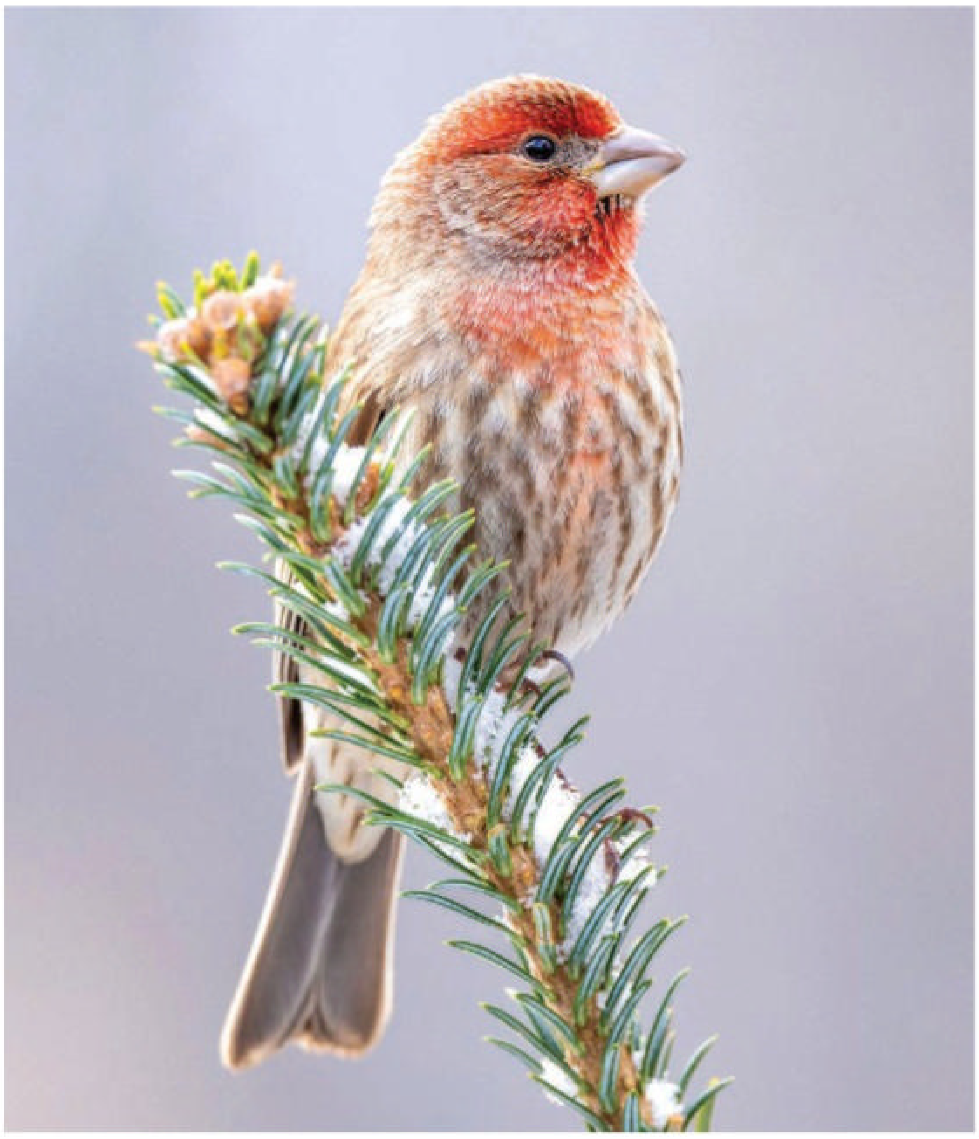




Male pine grosbeak

▲ **Flocking Together**
The sharp, stunning colors of northern cardinals, American goldfinches and house finches in winter are impressive. These typically territorial birds band together in winter when the food supply is limited.

▶ **Forest Friends**
The pine grosbeak is a fan favorite—found in the boreal forest, the world's largest intact woodland. The Minnesota-based nonprofit Friends of Sax-Zim Bog preserves and protects Sax-Zim Bog, which is in the southern reaches of the boreal forest.



◀ **Redheaded Charmer**
The rosy red heads and necks of house finches are balanced by streaked brown plumage and a visible red rump in flight.

These birds are native to the western U.S. and were sold as "Hollywood Finches" in the 1940s in New York. There, a few were let loose, and today all house finches in the eastern U.S. are descendants of these freed feathered friends.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ROLFNUSSBAUMER.COM; MARIE READ; MIKE MATTHEWS PHOTOGRAPHY

◄ A Hearty Appetite

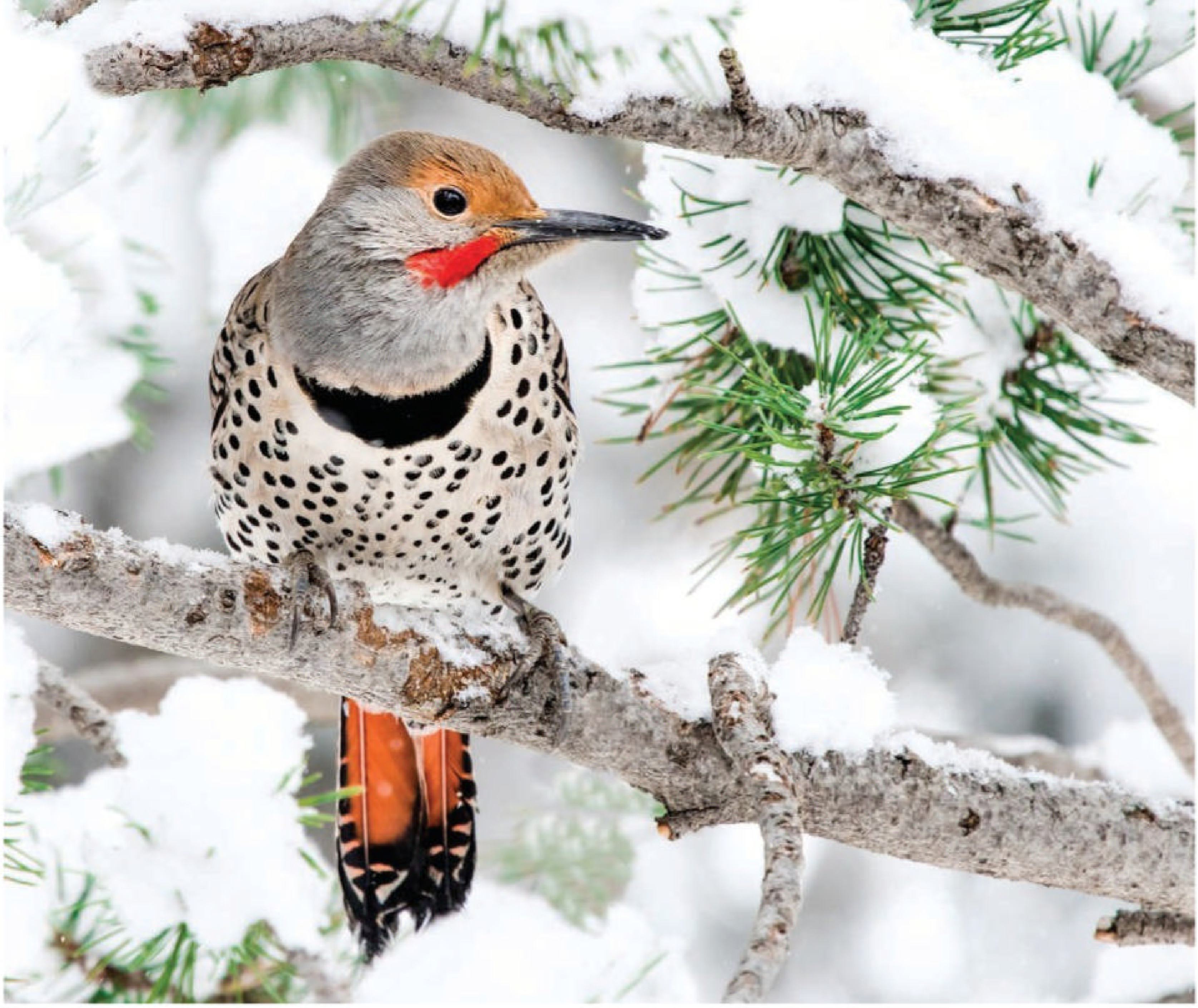
Watching curious little chickadees snack is an entertaining cold-weather activity. “Boreal chickadees are hardcore carnivores,” says Sparky Stensaas, the executive director of Friends of Sax-Zim Bog. They love meat, fat, suet and peanut butter.”

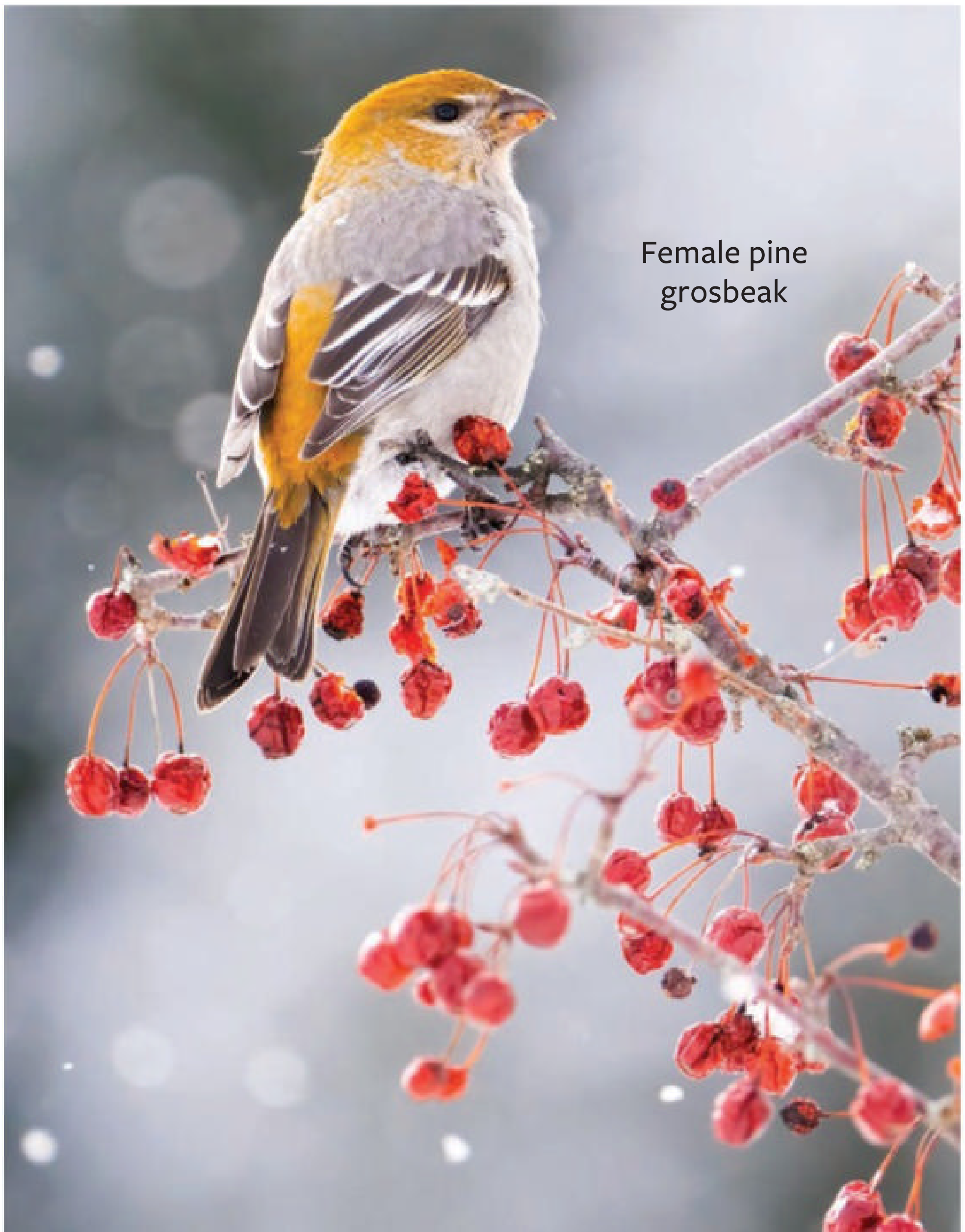
► Flurry of Snowflakes

Camouflaged amid the soft white snow, robust flocks of snow buntings walk along the barren, rocky tundra in winter.

These medium-sized songbirds sport small conical bills with rust-colored accents.

Nicknamed “snowflakes,” snow buntings spend time with horned larks and longspurs in winter. When the flock takes flight, a flash of black and white fills the horizon for a delightful winter display.





Female pine grosbeak

▲ **Knock, Knock**
The large brown bodies of northern flickers feature pronounced black plumage and stark facial stripes. In summer, they walk on the ground, lapping up ants and beetles with a barbed tongue. In winter, they hammer on tree trunks.

◀ **A Chance at Gold**
Passionate birders bear the cold to spot these rarely seen feathered friends in winter. “Pine grosbeaks wander in winter searching for mountain ash berries. If crops are poor, they may end up in fruit trees or at backyard feeders,” Sparky says.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: DAWNKEY/GETTY IMAGES; RICHARD BUQUOI; MARIE READ

▸ **Classic Beauty**
Birdwatchers are rewarded for appreciating winter weather. The winged critters are conspicuous against leafless trees and the bare background, especially the northern cardinal—whose shade of red is worth swooning over. ●

Her fervor for feathered friends is what makes North Dakota winters more manageable for Fargo-based journalist Kelsey Roseth.

AGLAONEMA: DROPSTOCK/GETTY IMAGES; CALATHEA: TOMDEER/GETTY IMAGES

GROW THIS, *NOT THAT*

TODAY'S HOUSEPLANT selection is almost as impressive as the many benefits of having them in your home. Some options are better than others, though, so consider skipping the problematic plants and growing the more prized picks instead.

✗ Calathea

✓ Aglaonema

Six easy-to-grow houseplants—and six that may not be the right choice for you

BY LUKE MILLER

▲ GROW THIS: BIRD'S NEST FERN

Bird's nest fern is more adaptable than other ferns. "Its thick fronds hold up better to dry air and missed waterings—and it has a fun architectural form," says Justin Hancock, horticulturist at Costa Farms, one of the largest horticultural growers in the world. With thick, glossy, leatherlike fronds, bird's nest fern is drought tolerant and can go one to two weeks without water. It can also put up with low light conditions, although it prefers bright, indirect lighting. This fern is a slow grower, but over time it can reach more than 2 feet across.

NOT THAT: BOSTON FERN

Boston fern is not necessarily hard to grow, but it is hard to keep in good shape. The plant is sensitive to lighting, so it's not uncommon to see some of Boston fern's fronds shrivel up and the root ball dry out if watering is forgotten. Once the spent fronds are removed, the plant's handsome shape suffers. Before you know it, you've got a sad sack plant to hide in the corner whenever company is expected.

▼ GROW THIS: ANTHURIUM

"If you want a steady show of flowers indoors, you can't beat anthurium," Justin says. "Newer anthurium varieties have flowers that can last a month or more in good growing conditions and appear on and off throughout the year," he says. The blooms come in a wide range of colors including red, pink, purple, white and orange. Anthurium won't put up a fuss if you miss a watering and it grows fine in average indoor temperatures and humidity levels. It prefers medium to bright light

BIRD'S NEST FERN: OLENADUYGU/SHUTTERSTOCK; ANTHURIUM: VIDOK/GETTY IMAGES; PEACE LILY: MID PHOTOGRAPHER/SHUTTERSTOCK; BOSTON FERN: M.PHOTOSTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

and grows 2 to 3 feet tall and 1 foot wide.

NOT THAT: MINIATURE ROSE

A miniature rose plant can be fussy. It looks beautiful when you bring it home from the store, but after the blooms drop, it can be an ordeal keeping the foliage looking healthy. And chances of reblooming are directly proportional to the amount of light the plant gets. It wants six hours of sunlight, but there aren't many indoor locations short of a greenhouse that offer that amount of light.

◀ GROW THIS: PEACE LILY

Peace lily is popular for its dramatic look, featuring large leaves and white flowers that look like calla lilies. It's fairly easy to grow if you keep it watered. Peace lilies wilt as soon as the soil starts to dry out, but can bounce back quickly. However, peace lily may not recover if you often forget to water it. Plants can bloom throughout the year if there's enough light. In low-light conditions, grow it as a foliage plant. Peace lily grows up to 3 feet tall and wide.

NOT THAT: ORCHID

Finicky houseplants are those that just aren't suited to the conditions at hand. Think of a tropical plant that doesn't like the dry air in your house or is sensitive to cold drafts. Orchid is a good example. Phalaenopsis orchids may hold on if you give them any amount of attention—but getting them to rebloom can be tricky. They're very particular about lighting and drainage, so you may be able to keep orchids alive, but it takes extra effort to get them to rebloom.

MINIATURE ROSE: BLICKWINKEL/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; ORCHID: MANUWE/GETTY IMAGES

Boston fern

Miniature rose

Orchid

▲ GROW THIS: WHITE BIRD OF PARADISE

White bird of paradise is a striking plant with a lush, tropical look similar to a banana plant. However, white bird of paradise grows slower and is more forgiving if the soil dries out. Grown for its foliage, the plant has thick leaves that are less susceptible to physical damage and browning from humidity or other environmental conditions that can mar big banana leaves. It likes direct sunlight and consistent watering whenever the top 2 inches of soil are dry and can grow to be 8 feet tall or more indoors.

NOT THAT: BANANA PLANT

A banana plant is a great houseplant to grow—if you have a warm and humid greenhouse attached to the house. It needs full sunlight and 50% humidity to look its best. While those conditions are common outdoors in the tropics, they're not easily recreated by homeowners with arid, heated indoor air in winter.

▼ GROW THIS: DWARF BROMELIADS

"For something a little more out of the box, give dwarf bromeliads a try," Justin says. "Bromeliads produce colorful flowers and offer an exotic look, but are more forgiving about light, water and humidity levels." The plants have large, shiny, dark green leaves and fountainlike flower structures with brightly colored bracts that last for months. They prefer bright light and grow up to 3 feet tall.

NOT THAT: STREPTOCARPUS

Streptocarpus is a popular houseplant, valued for its textured leaves and bright blooms. But it's a bit fussy when

WHITE BIRD OF PARADISE: WIRESTOCK/GETTY IMAGES; DWARF BROMELIAD: SERHII PRYSTUPA/GETTY IMAGES; AGLAONEMA: DROPSTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

BANANA PLANT: PHOTOLOGY1971, STREPTOCARPUS: DORLING KINDERSLEY LTD/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO (2); CALATHEA: SARAYUT THANEERAT/GETTY IMAGES

it comes to moisture, and people often push it to the edge by overwatering the plant, not giving it proper drainage, or a combination of the two. Some varieties experience annual leaf dieback, where leaves turn brown. The plants are also often attacked by mealybugs.

◀ GROW THIS: AGLAONEMA

“If you’ve not had a lot of luck with other foliage plants, try Aglaonema,” Justin says. “It’s one of the easiest houseplants to grow, with outstanding drought tolerance and better tolerance to low-light, and they hold up better to low relative humidity.” Also called Chinese evergreen, Aglaonema is known for its attractive variegated leaves in different colors and patterns. It can grow in very low light but does best in medium to bright light and with watering only when the soil dries out. Aglaonema reaches 1 to 3 feet tall and wide.

NOT THAT: CALATHEA

Pinstripe calathea is a lovely foliage plant with distinctive markings. The trouble is that it is sensitive to cool and dry conditions—which happen to be prevalent in many homes in winter. A warm, humid environment and bright, indirect light will help keep the foliage looking good—but it also needs evenly moist soil and regular fertilizer. In short, there are easier houseplants to grow. ●

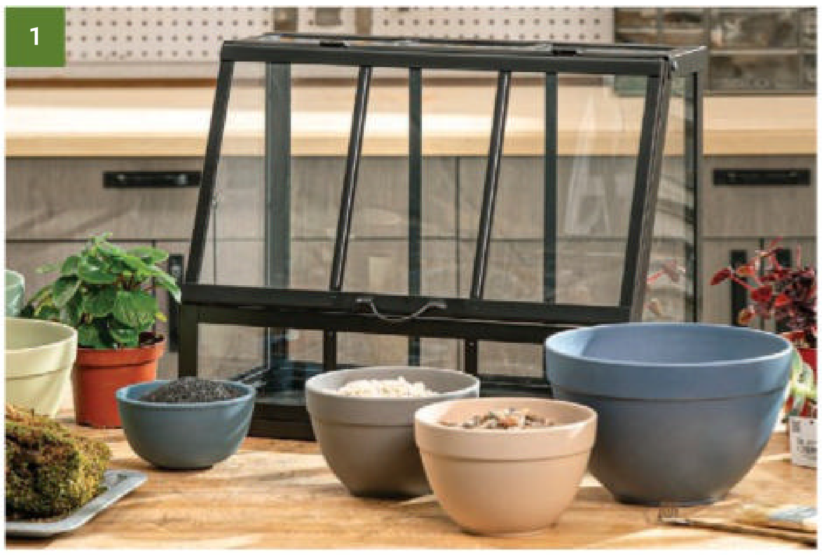
Luke Miller prefers growing indoor plants that don’t object to the low lighting and infrequent watering in his 1960s Rat Pack lounge.

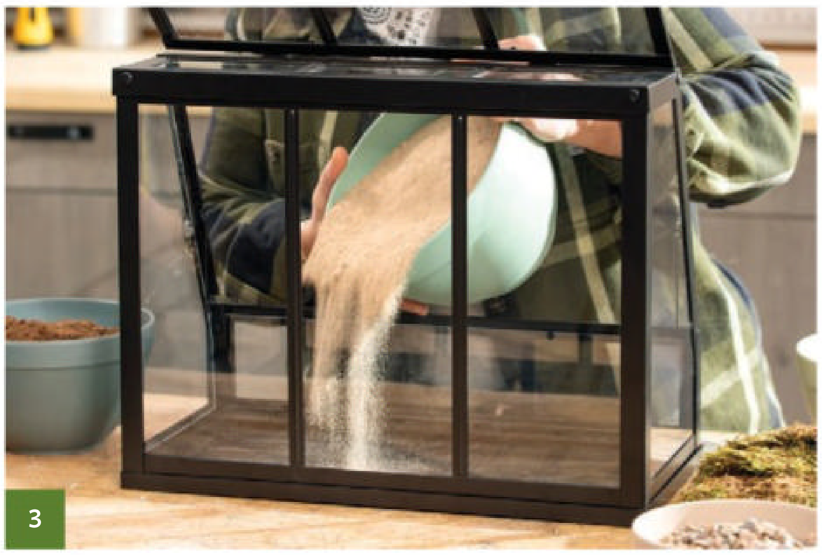
Banana plant

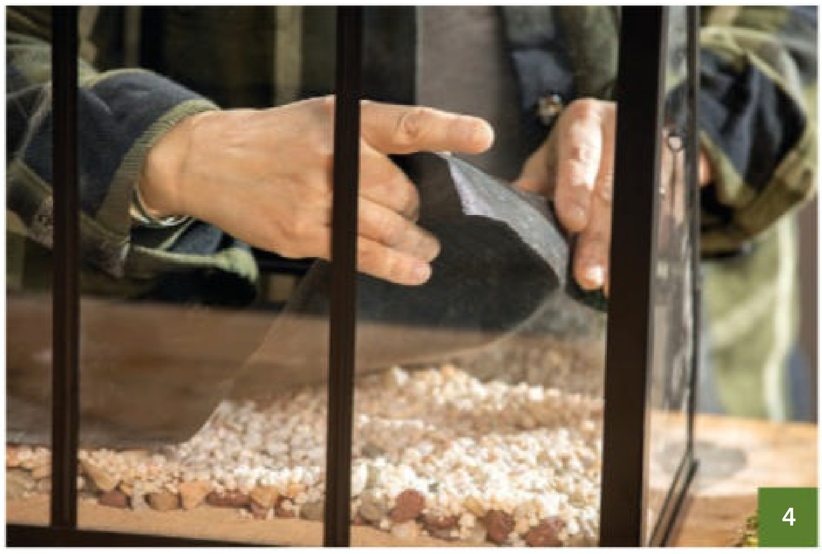
Streptocarpus

Calathea

BRING THE
OUTDOORS IN







Making a terrarium is about as close as you can get to a Zen DIY project. Once you have gathered the proper materials and squared away your plant selections, it's as simple as layering it all together and watching your mini ecosystem thrive. Here, I'll walk you through my foolproof process and cover all the required elements for good filtration, healthy soil, strong root growth and resistance against fungus and disease. **BY CARMEN DE LA PAZ**

Step 1: Choose a proper container. Select a lidded container that will trap moisture inside and hold enough soil and drainage layers to support the growth of your plants.

Note: Due to the high moisture level and lack of drainage holes, a closed-lid terrarium has a high risk for root rot, fungus and disease, so drainage layers are extremely important.

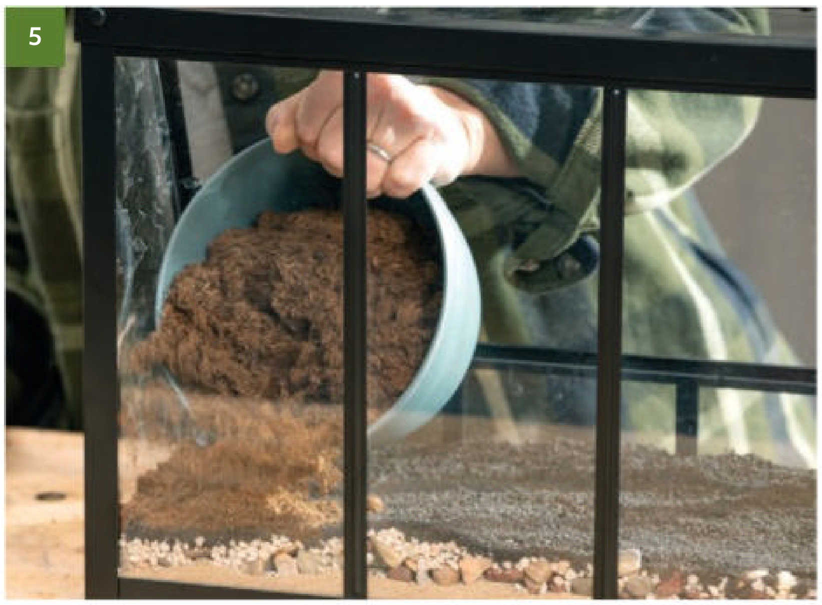
Step 2: Select plants. Choose plants that will thrive in the high-moisture environment of a closed terrarium—consult someone at your local garden center for recommendations. To give your mini garden plenty of visual interest, select plants that are different in height, leaf shape and color.

Note: Succulents and cactuses are better for open-style terrariums and require different growing conditions (more on page 43).

Step 3: Start with a draining base layer. Lay a ½-in. sand bed into the container. On top of that, add 1-in. layer of small to medium pebbles or small stones. These base layers will pull excess water away from the roots of the plants, helping to prevent decay and disease. If desired, you can add a thicker layer of either material.

Step 4: Lay in landscape fabric and add charcoal. Activated charcoal will help filter toxins and help keep your plants healthy from disease. To prevent the charcoal from seeping down and mixing into the stones and sand, cut a piece of landscape fabric as close to the shape of your vessel as possible and lay it over the pebbles, then add a ¼-to-½-in. layer of charcoal over the landscape fabric.

ALL PHOTOS: TMB STUDIO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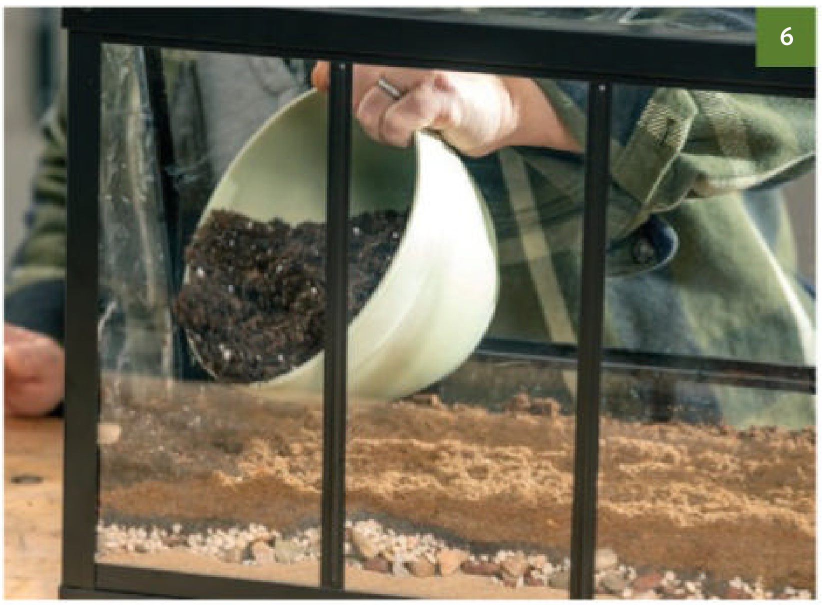
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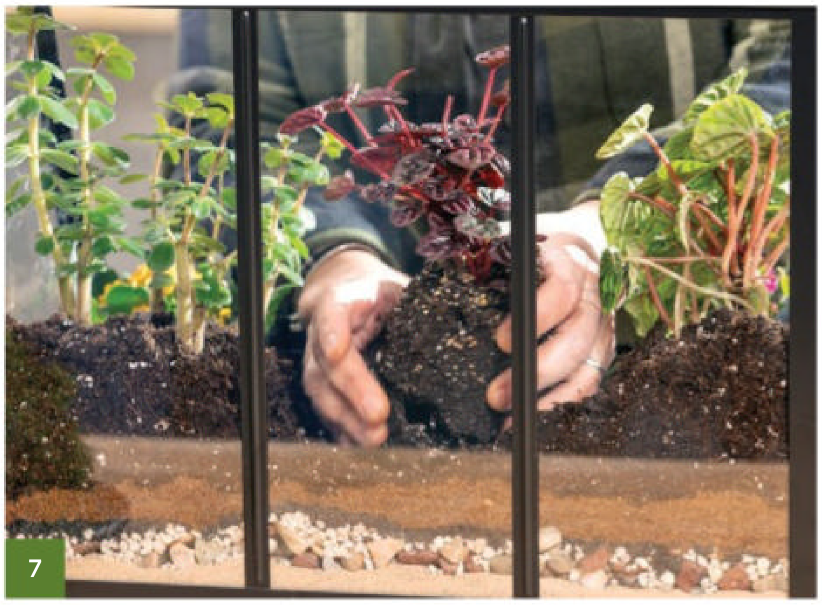
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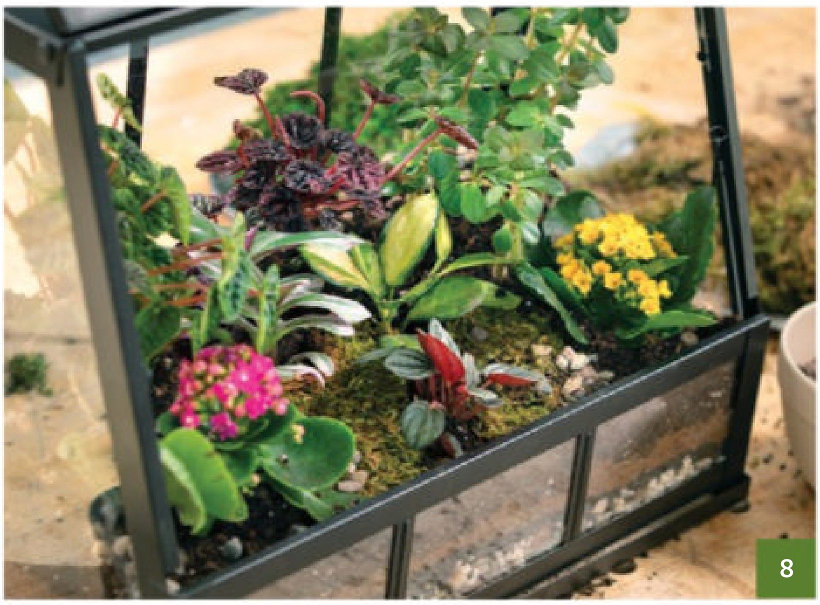
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TOOLS

- Scissors
- Small garden shovel
- Water mister
- Watering can

MATERIALS

- Activated charcoal
- Landscape fabric
- Lidded terrarium
- Living moss
- Plants
- Potting soil
- Sand
- Small/medium pebbles
- Small stones
- Sphagnum peat moss

Step 5: Add sphagnum peat moss. Lay in ½ to 1 in. of sphagnum peat moss. This layer acts as a barrier to keep the potting mix from sifting into the drainage material.

Step 6: Add potting soil. Add 2 to 3 in. of potting soil. This will be your terrarium's thickest layer, where the plants will grow their roots. If desired, vary the height of the soil layer across your terrarium. This will create more visual interest and allow you to emphasize the height differences among your plants. If you are planning to add any decorative elements, this is the time to think about placement and take advantage of the undulations you've made in the soil. High points are good areas to place plants that may need less moisture—water will drain down and dry out faster.

Step 7: Place and plant. Once you've determined your preferred plant placement, add plants.

Note: Plants that thrive in a moist environment tend to grow faster, so be sure to leave them ample space to grow in.

Step 8: Add pebbles and living moss. Put small pebbles and living moss around the base of your plants—this will add texture and help prevent erosion by holding the layers in place as you water.

Step 9: Maintain your terrarium. Plants in a sealed terrarium seldom need watering. You want moisture in the vessel, but not so much that the roots decay. Observe the environment, and water as you see fit or mist with a light spray. Open the lid of the terrarium occasionally to let out excess humidity, closing the lid once condensation is gone. Do not put the terrarium in direct sunlight; the glass can act as a magnifier and plant leaves may get burned. ●

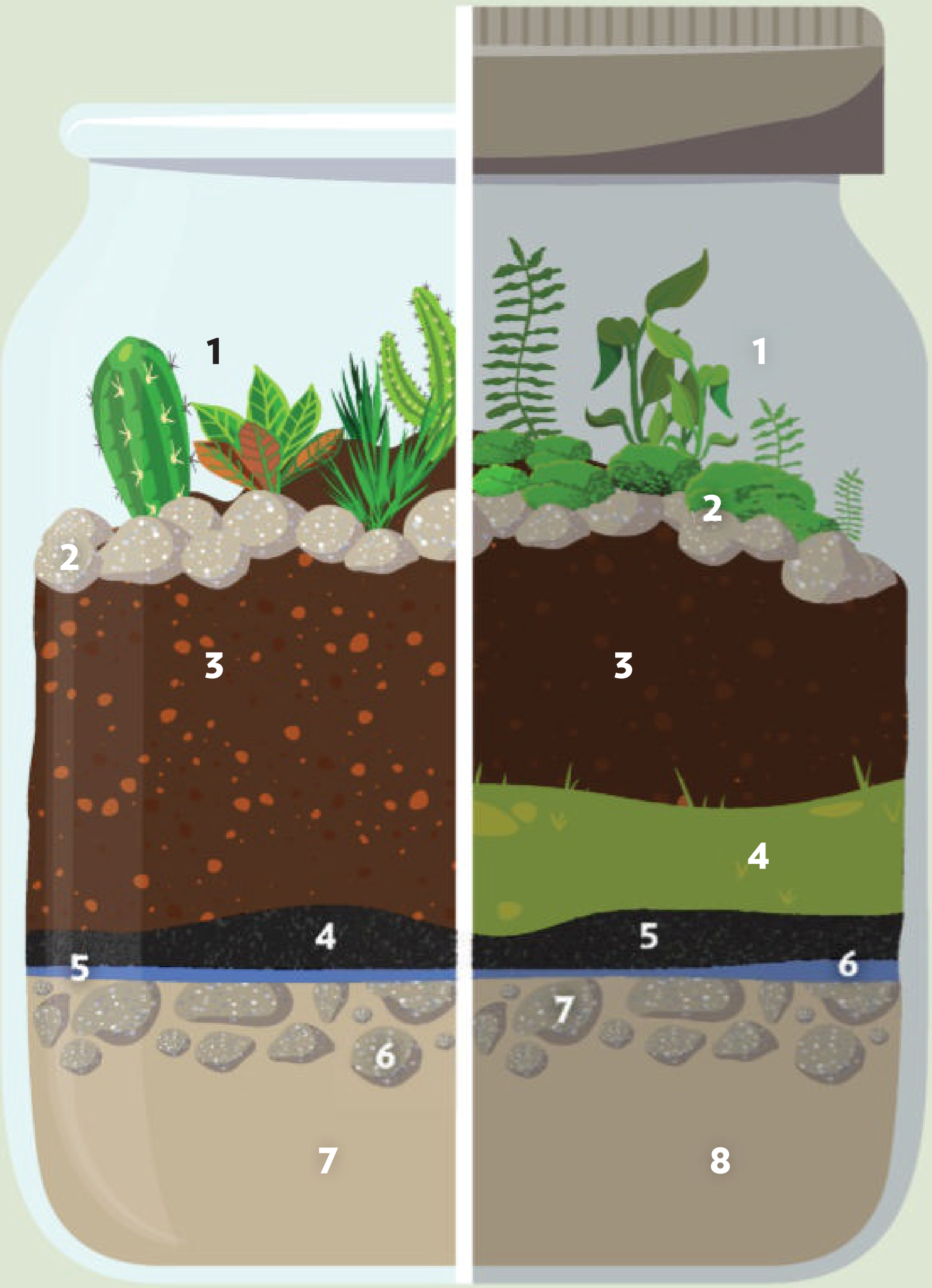
ALL PHOTOS: TMB STUDIO; ILLUSTRATION: AVIRAL GUPTA/FAMILY HANDYMAN

TERRARIUM SOIL LAYERS

Water-loving plants grow happily in the moisture of a closed-lid terrarium, but others, such as cactuses and succulents, prefer an arid environment, calling for an open terrarium. Use this guide to build your terrarium's layers.

OPEN

1. Plants
2. Small Decorative Pebbles
3. Soil (Cactus Mix)
4. Activated Charcoal
5. Landscape Fabric
6. Small Rocks
7. Sand



CLOSED

1. Plants
2. Small Decorative Pebbles/Living Moss
3. Potting Soil
4. Sphagnum Peat Moss
5. Activated Charcoal
6. Landscape Fabric
7. Small Rocks
8. Sand

LIFESPAN OF A TERRARIUM

Quality terrarium care means constant adjustments to the light, the temperature and the watering schedule. On average, terrariums last four months to two years. Most people give up easily on a terrarium because they aren't aware of how of care differs for open and closed vessels.

Scan the code to learn how to make an open-style terrarium from our friends at Family Handyman.

"Elegant and beautiful and the type of rich elegance that anyone would be thrilled to own, with never a disappointment!"
— E. B., Stone Mountain, GA
C.
Stauer Impossible Price Starting as low as $39
Jewelry that says more than words ever could
B.
A.
"Gift of the Year"
★★★★★
Client Rating of 4.9 Stars!

When Two Hearts Join

Discover the enchanting allure of our Two Heart Necklace, where love's symphony unfolds in timeless elegance. Inspired by that moment, when it all clicks and you realize you have found the one…. and where two become one, this exquisite piece captures the essence of two hearts entwined in a dance of destiny. Crafted with precision and passion and encased in 14k gold, it embodies the essence of your enduring love, echoing the sentiments of Shakespeare's sonnets and the romances of Jane Austen. Our client's favorite, it is now priced at its lowest ever even as gold reaches a record high, awarding it a stellar 4.9-star rating in reviews making it the Gift of the Year. Embrace the magic of shared dreams and whispered promises with the Two Heart Necklace, a treasure to cherish for generations to come.

Let this necklace be your own love story, a testament to the beauty of companionship and the joy of finding your perfect match. Embrace the romance and elegance of a bygone era with our Two Heart Necklace, a treasure to cherish for a lifetime.

Falling in love costs nothing but the value is priceless. Showing your love with this two hearts set costs next to nothing and the feeling you will get when wearing it or giving it to your love will certainly be priceless.

Two Hearts Collection

A.	**#57505** Bracelet (13 ⅖ ctw)	~~$299~~	**$39*** + S&P	***Save $260***
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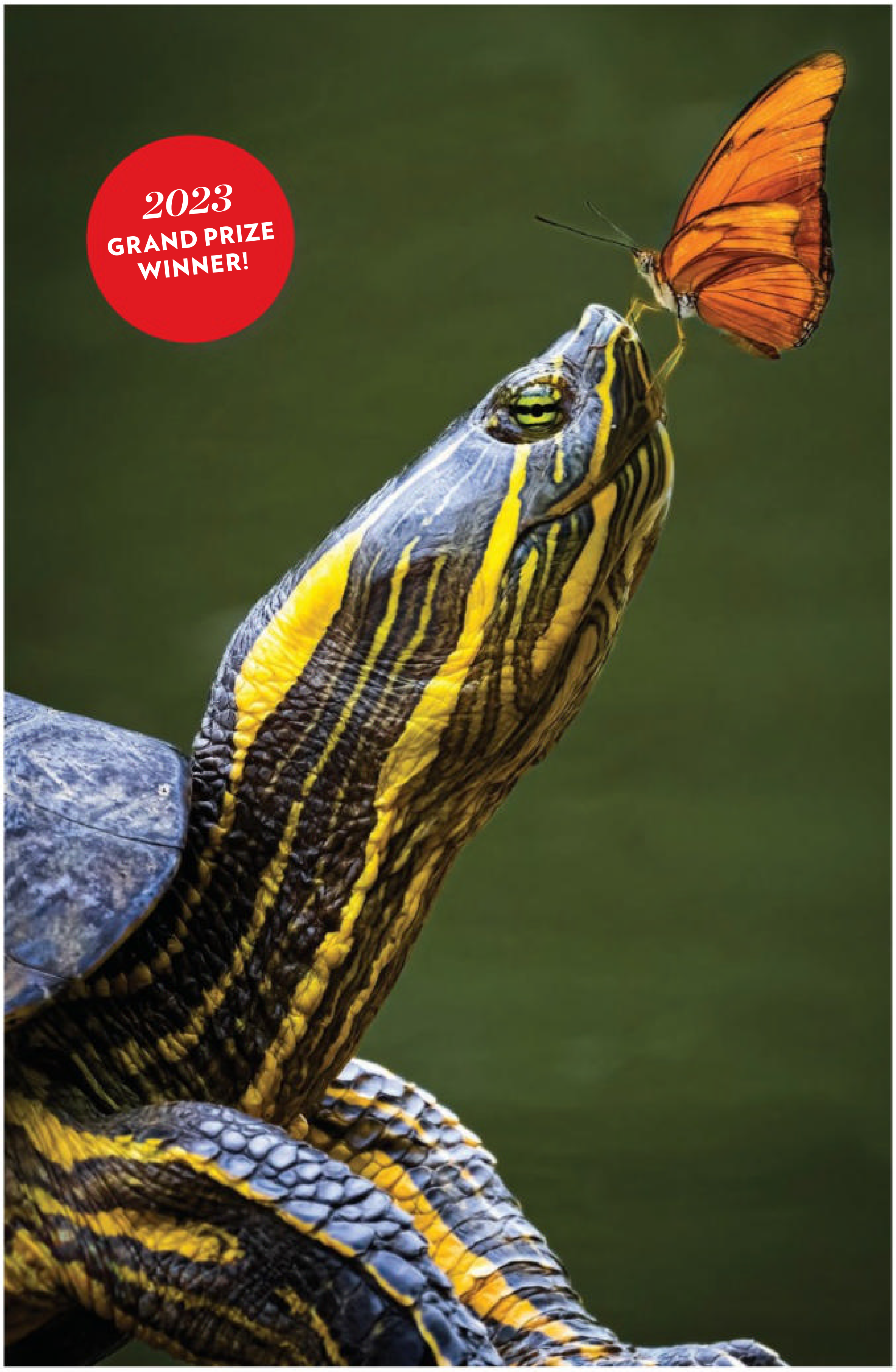


FOR YEARS, MY WIFE WOULD SPOT what she deemed to be a good photo of an animal, and each time, if I didn't agree, I'd say, "If it had a butterfly on its nose, that would be a good shot!"

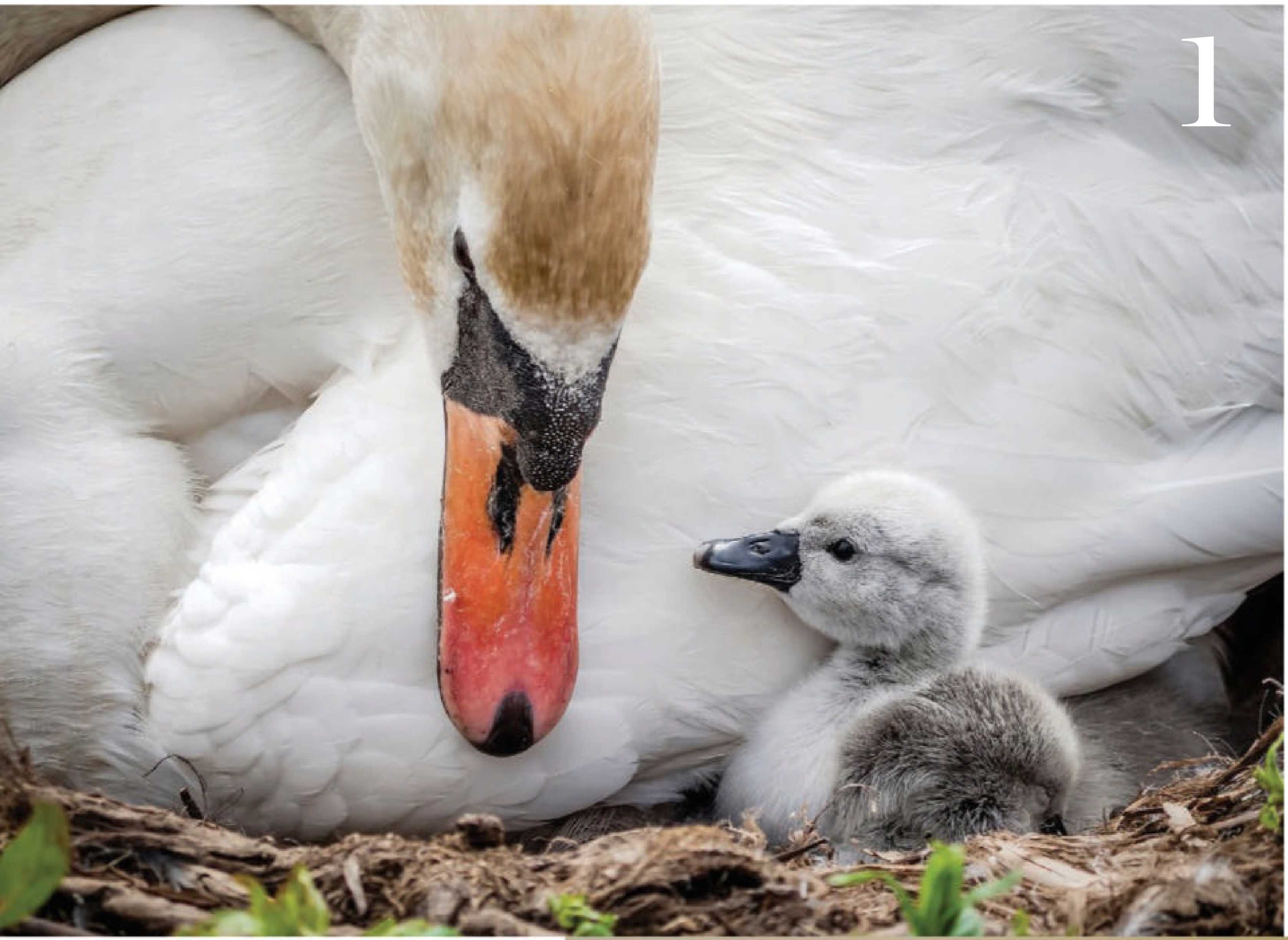
While on a river boat in Costa Rica, our guide said there was a turtle with a butterfly on its nose ahead. My wife and I laughed. He continued to tell us how butterflies land on turtles to get salt. Again, we laughed, as we thought he was embellishing. Then we saw it! We couldn't believe it.

Conrad Peloquin
WALNUT CREEK, CA

VOTE IN THE ANNUAL PHOTO CONTEST

Help us select the winner!

Readers submitted thousands of superb entries to the 2024 *Birds & Blooms* Annual Photo Contest, and our team picked four exceptional images from each category: birds, blooms and butterflies. Turn the page to see the 12 finalists, and vote for your favorite in each category at *birdsandblooms.com/contests* by Dec. 19.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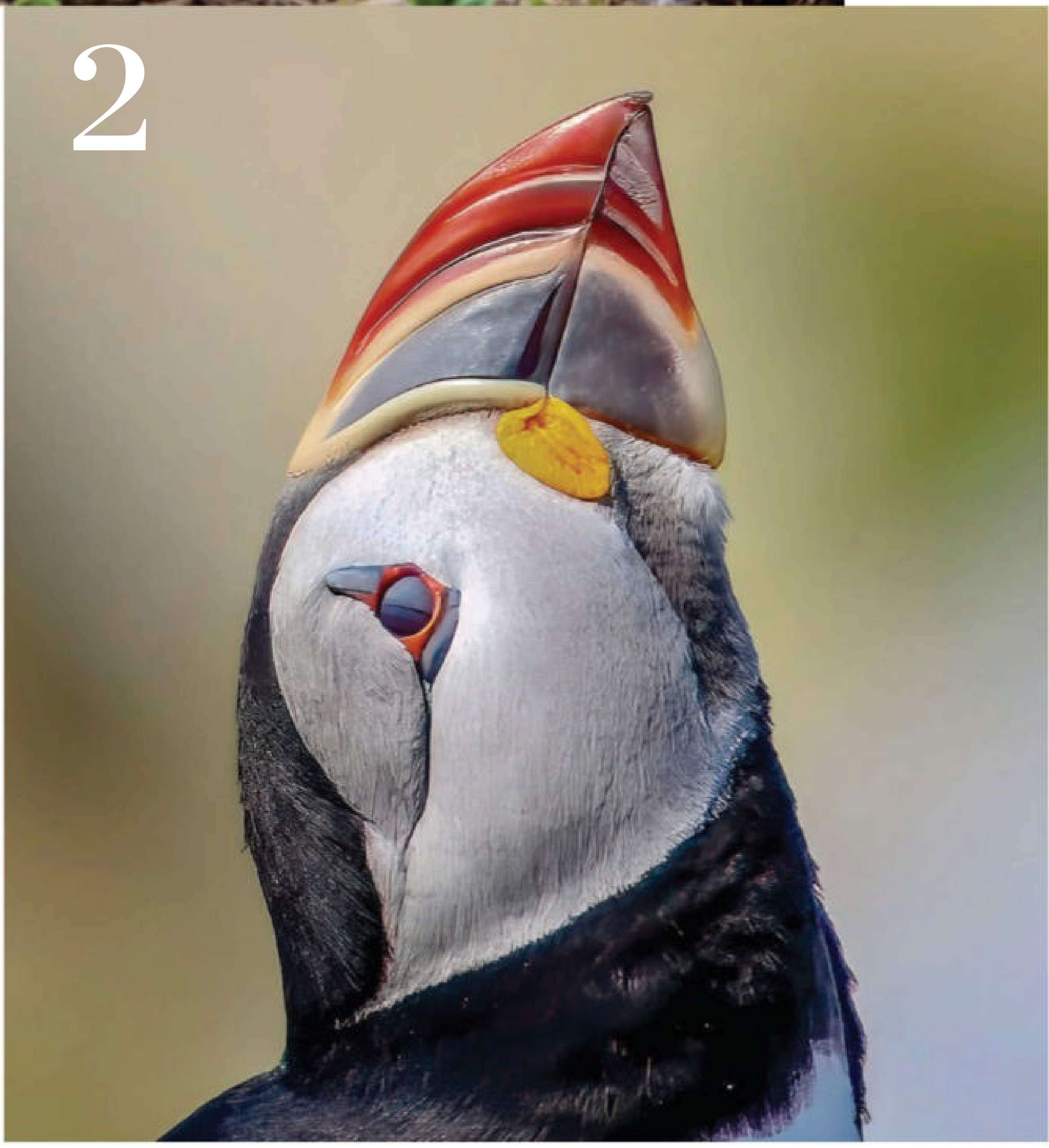
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BIRDS

1 **MUTE SWANS**
Ryan Christensen
GRAND HAVEN, MI

2 **ATLANTIC PUFFIN**
Ed Hughes
KEYSTONE HEIGHTS, FL

3 **RED-HEADED WOODPECKER**
Ray Parisi BLUFFTON, SC

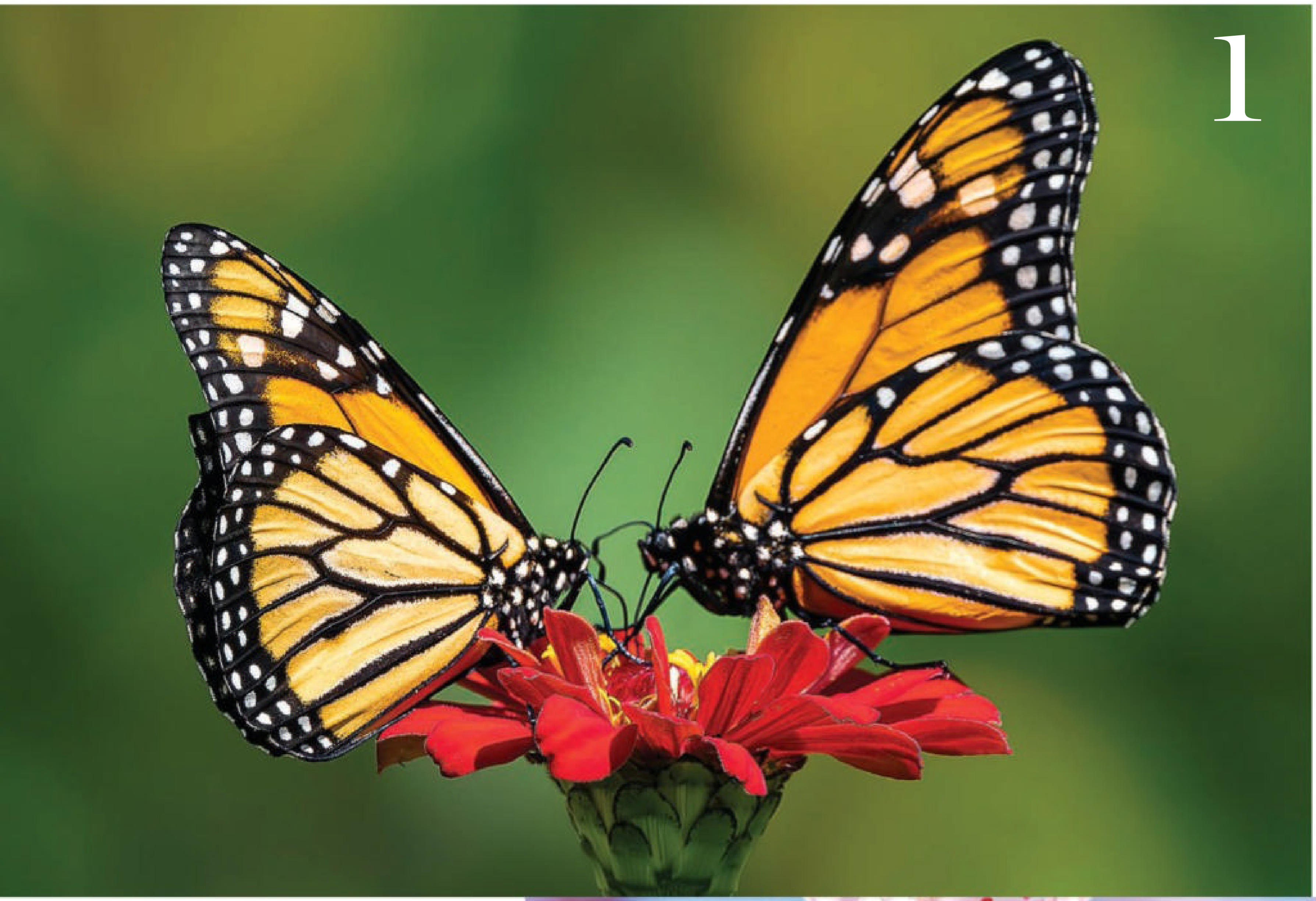
4 **DARK-EYED JUNCO**
Lucinda Moriarty
EAST HAMPTON, CT

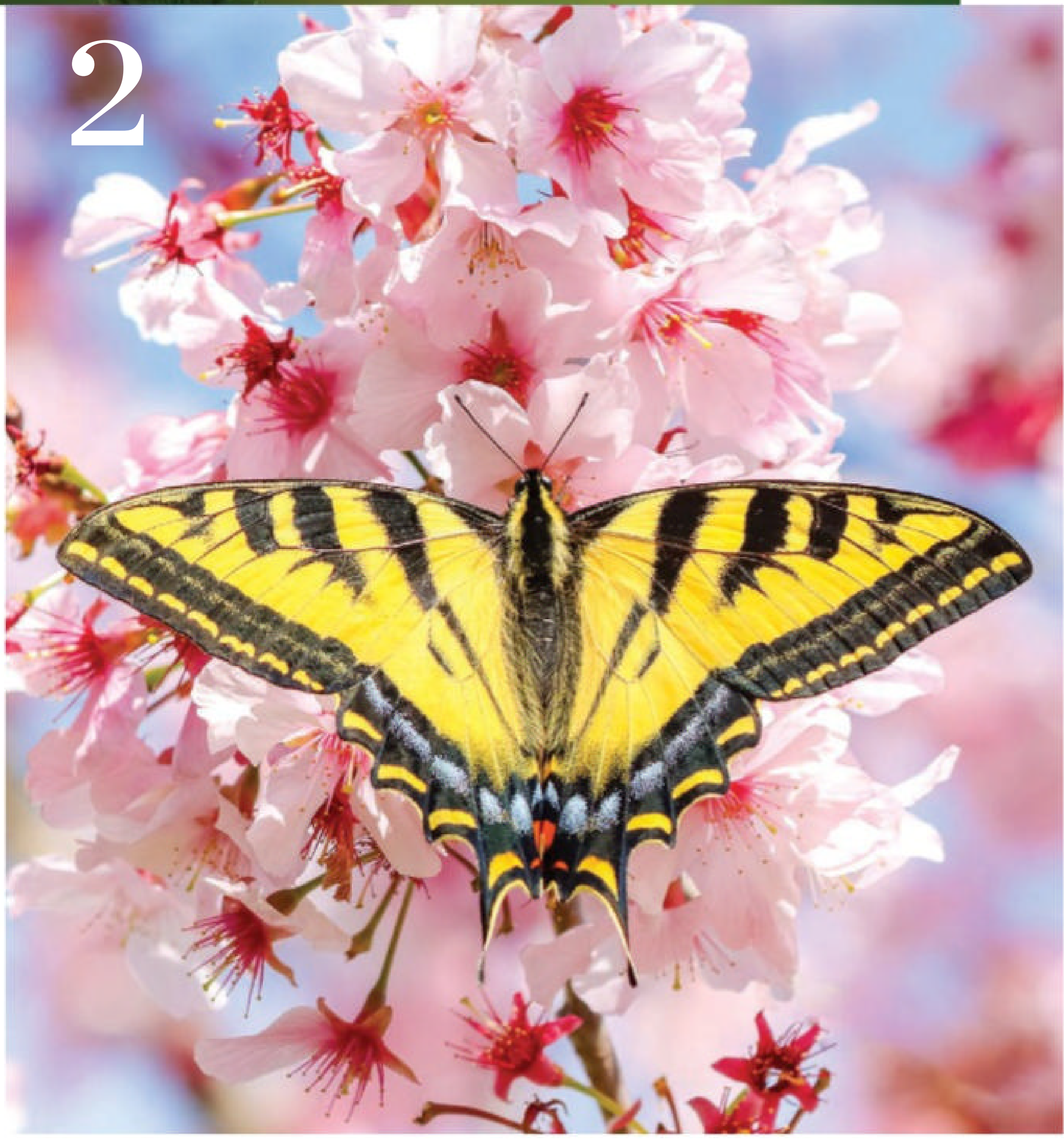
GO VOTE!

Visit *birdsandblooms .com/contests* to pick your favorite BIRD.

KEEP YOUR CAMERAS UP!

Next year's Annual Photo Contest will be announced in our August/ September 2025 issue. In the meantime, follow us on Instagram (*@birdsblooms*) and use *#birdsandblooms* to share your best nature photos with us.





BUTTERFLIES

1 **MONARCHS**
Leslie Benovitz
WEXFORD, PA

2 **TIGER SWALLOWTAIL**
Linda McCann
REDLANDS, CA

3 **AMERICAN LADY**
Christopher Baker
MADISON, AL

4 **PAINTED LADY**
Thomas Johnson
LITTLETON, CO

3

GO VOTE!

Hover your phone's camera here or go to *birdsandblooms.com /contests* to pick your favorite BUTTERFLY.

4

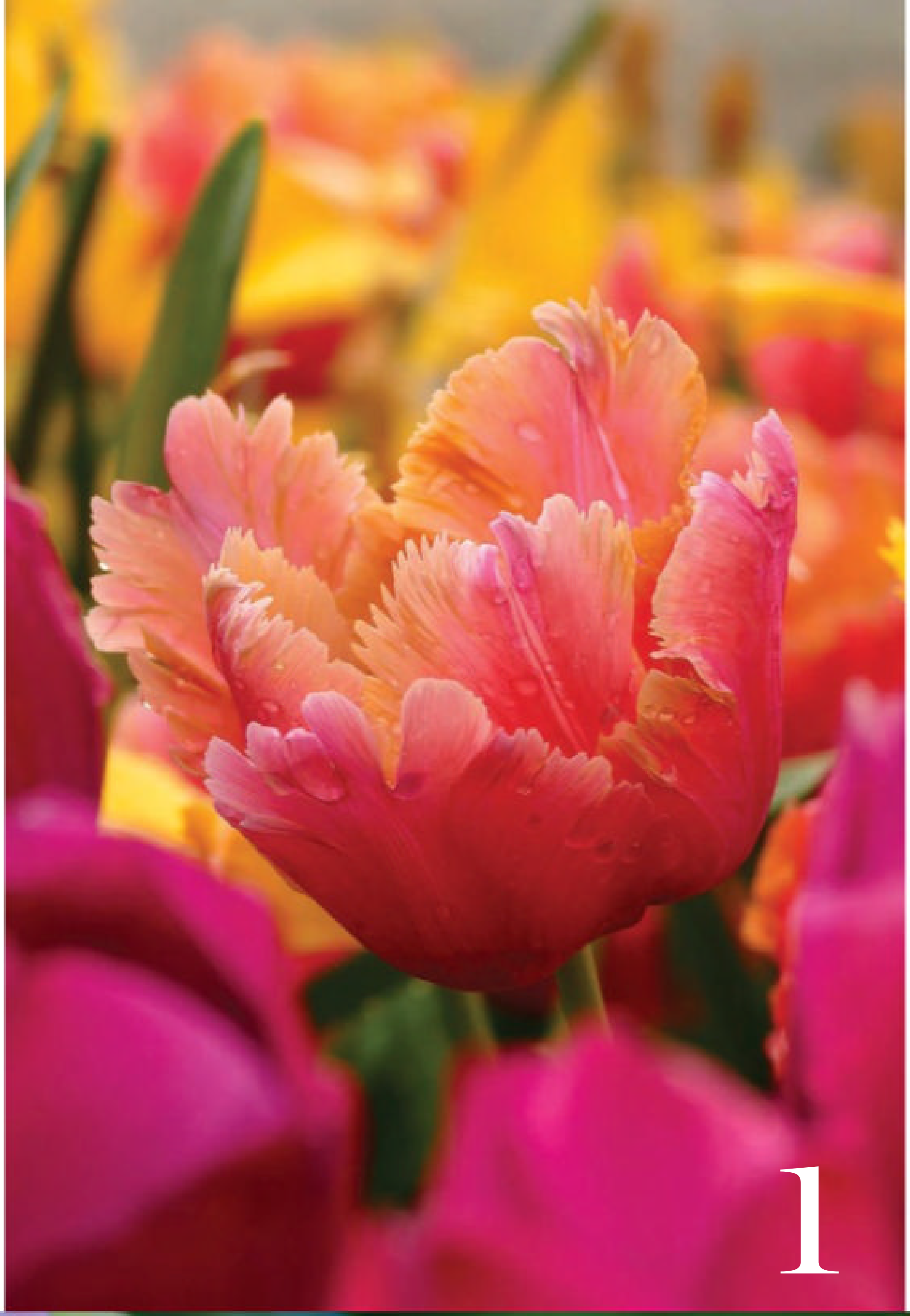
BLOOMS

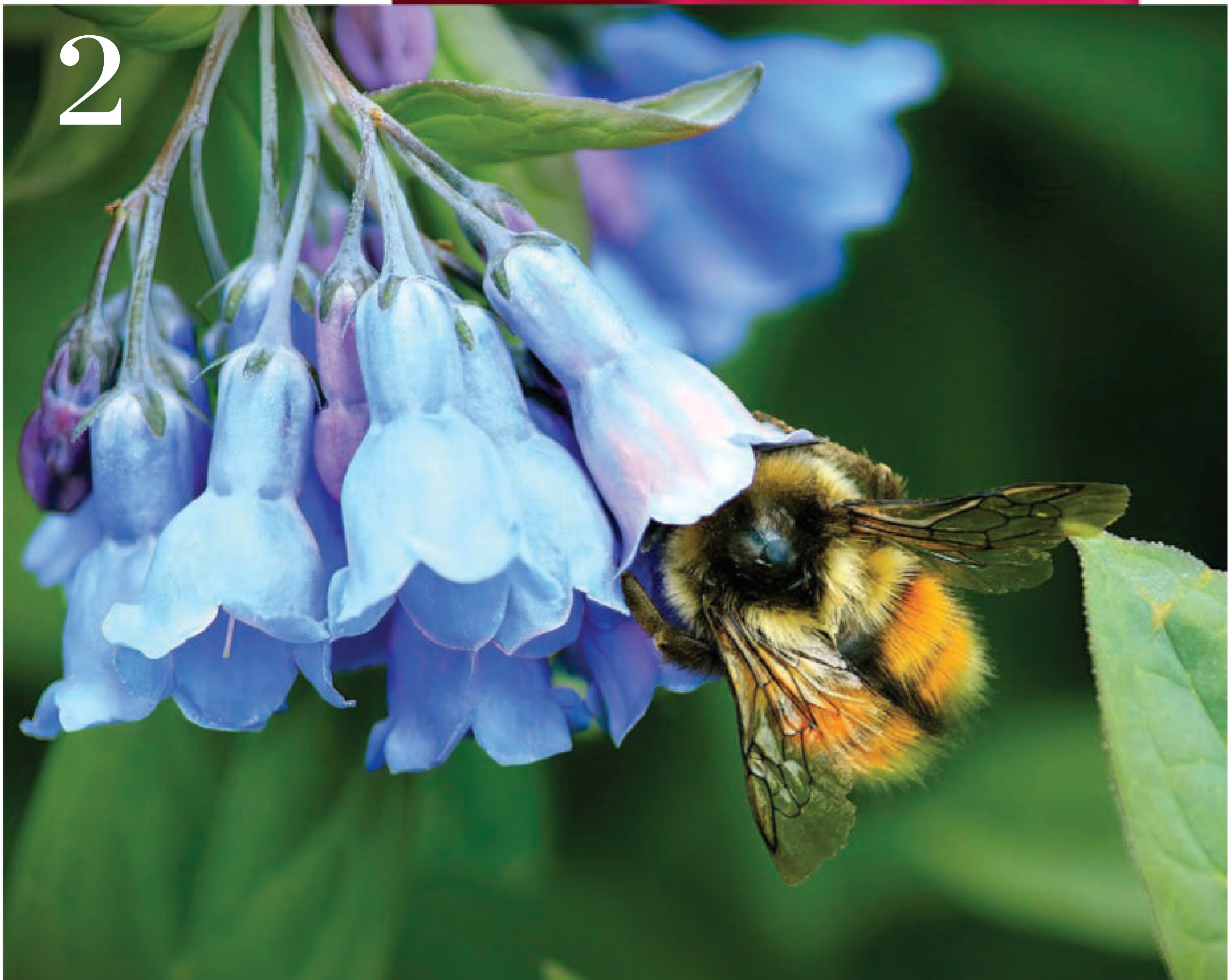
1 **AMAZING PARROT TULIP**
Corrie Carswell WYOMING, OH

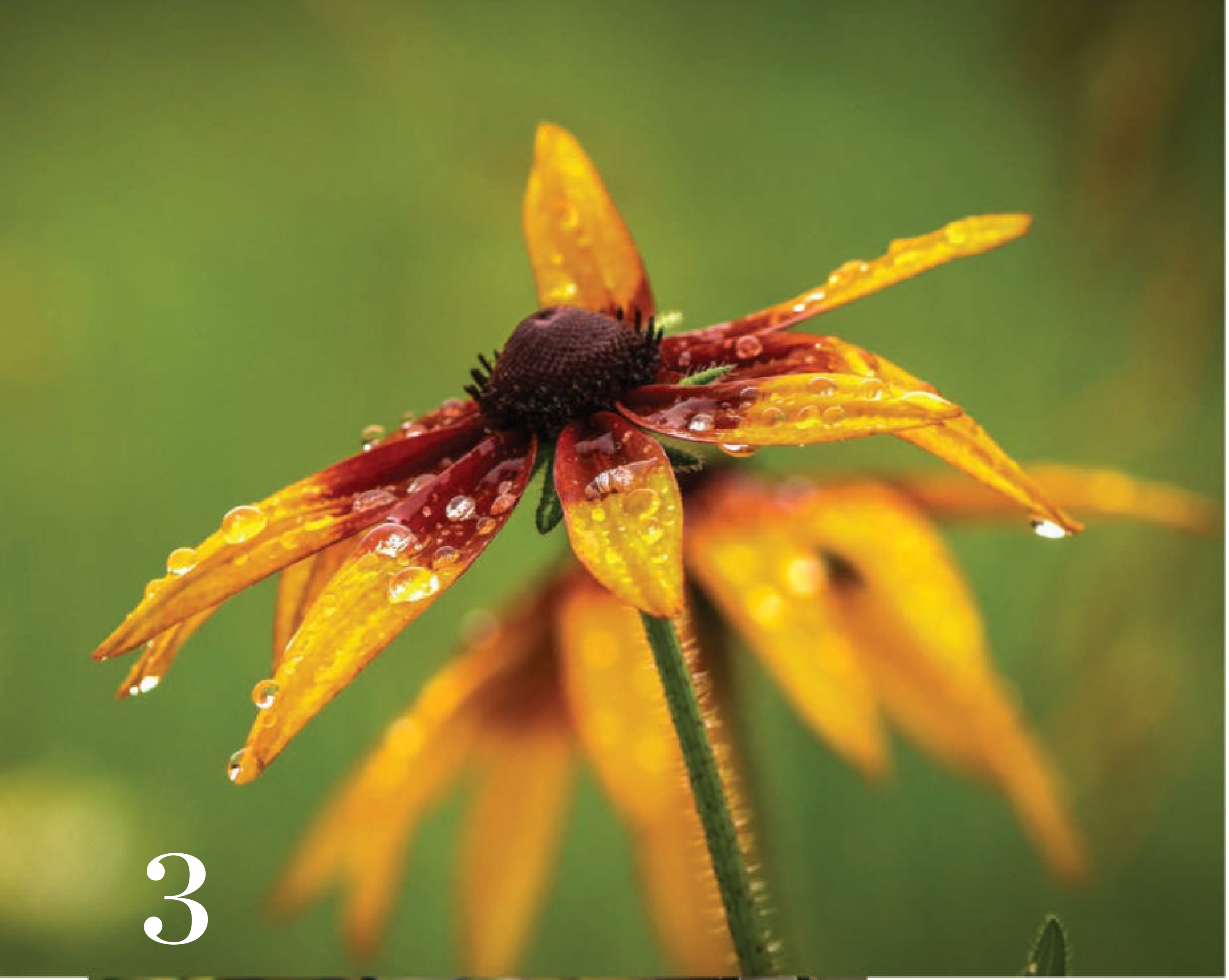
2 **MOUNTAIN BLUEBELLS**
Chris Talbot GRAND JUNCTION, CO

3 **BLACK-EYED SUSAN**
Erika Senglaub CANANDAIGUA, NY

4 **INDIAN PAINTBRUSH**
Callie Burton HEBER, AZ







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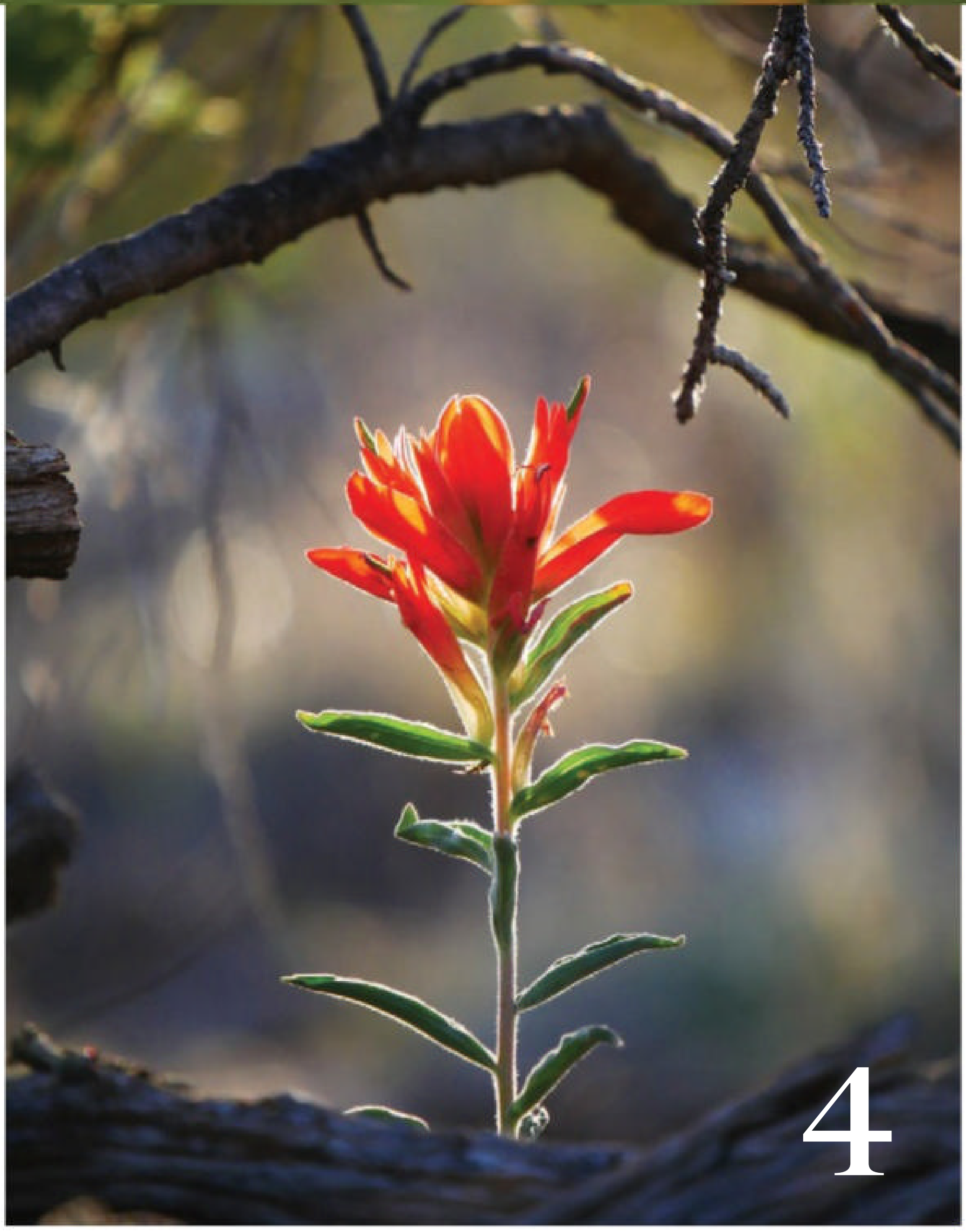

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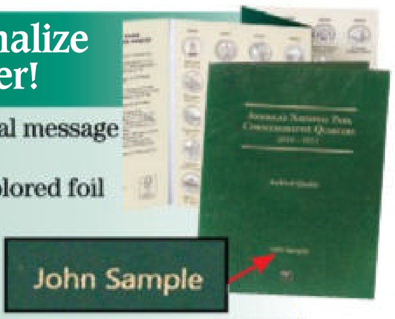

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BACKYARD CHAT

Ask the Experts

Advice from our pros about houseplants, bird feeding and more

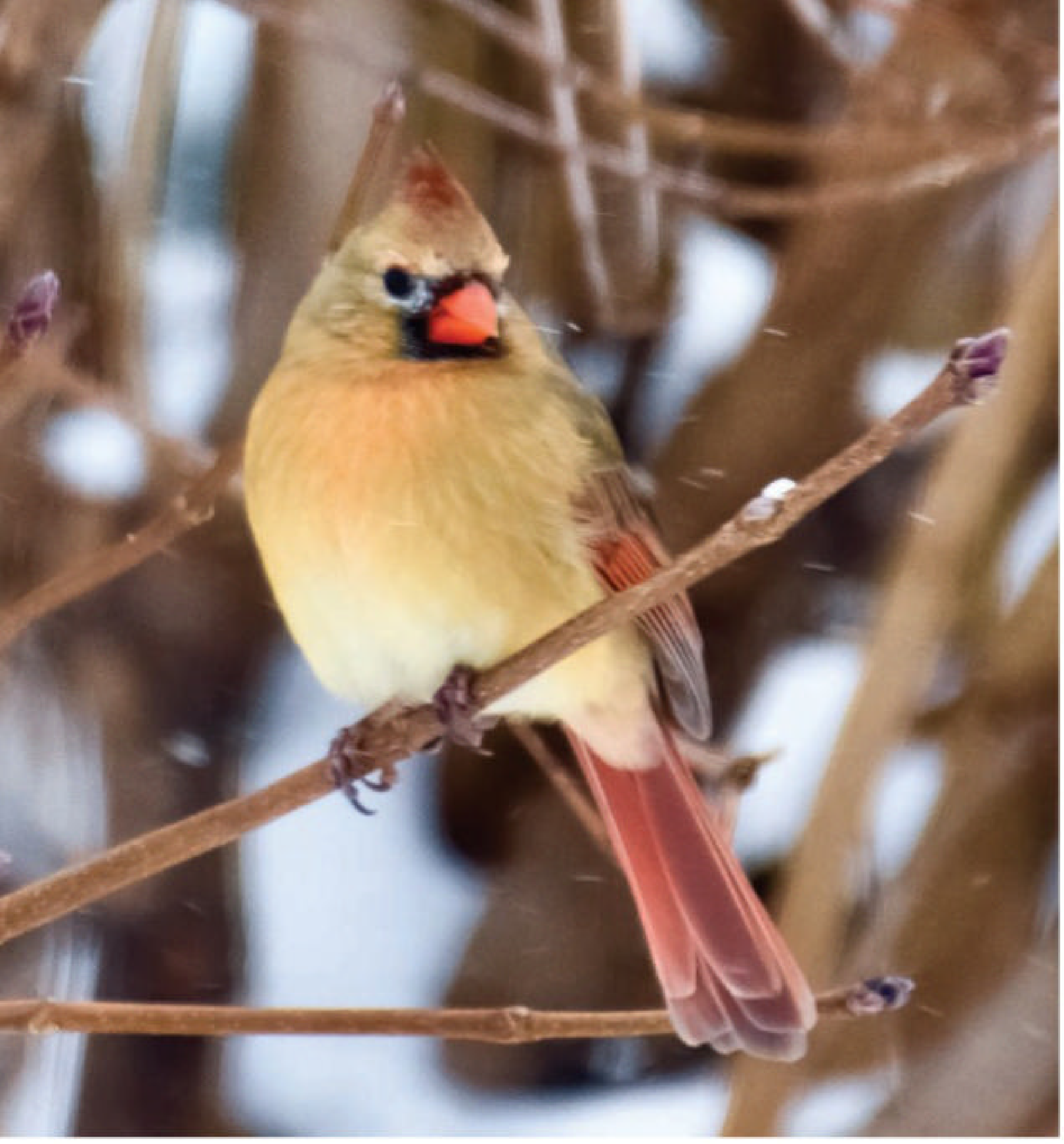
Grackle

CAVAN-IMAGES/SHUTTERSTOCK

Q A flock of grackles was devouring my suet, so I switched to an upside-down feeder. But now it seems as if no birds will eat from it. Woodpeckers have ignored it completely. What can I do to attract birds, especially woodpeckers, to the new feeder?

Erroll Jackson MARIETTA, GA

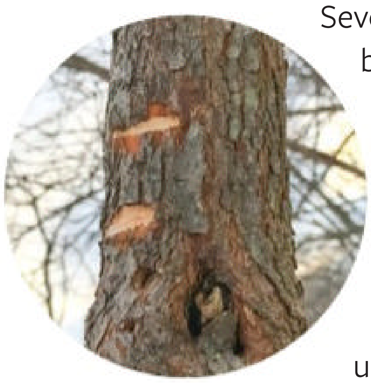
Kenn and Kimberly: Woodpeckers and other acrobatic species can easily access these upside-down feeders, but it can take a while for the birds to notice them and realize that the food is on the underside. One way to help them is to keep the feeder located where you want it, but rig it up with wires so that it's sideways, with the suet on the side instead of underneath. After birds find it, you can gradually shift its position until the food is on the underside again. Grackles may mob the feeder at first, but they should visit less often after it's returned to its upside-down position.



Q What's the white ring around this female cardinal's eyes? Is it frost or possibly a disease? **Holly Harnly** MYERSTOWN, PA

Kenn and Kimberly: While a number of diseases can affect the eyes of wild birds, this doesn't look like any of the ones we know. (Admittedly, we do not have any training in bird diseases.) It looks like you took this photo in wintry conditions, with some snowflakes or sleet in the air and possible snow in the background, so we suspect this cardinal just has some snow or frost temporarily sticking to the feathers of her face.

Q We noticed these markings on a tree near our bird feeder. What could have done this? **John Spory** BOSWELL, PA



Kenn and Kimberly: We can't be positive of the cause, but we think a porcupine probably made these marks. Several kinds of wild mammals eat bark, including beavers, rabbits and sometimes squirrels, but only porcupines are likely to climb this high on the trunk of a tree and chew away that much bark. They usually chew larger continuous areas, so it's unusual to see this kind of damage, with three separate, horizontal bands. That's part of the reason why we're uncertain. But a porcupine is our best guess.

White dipladenia

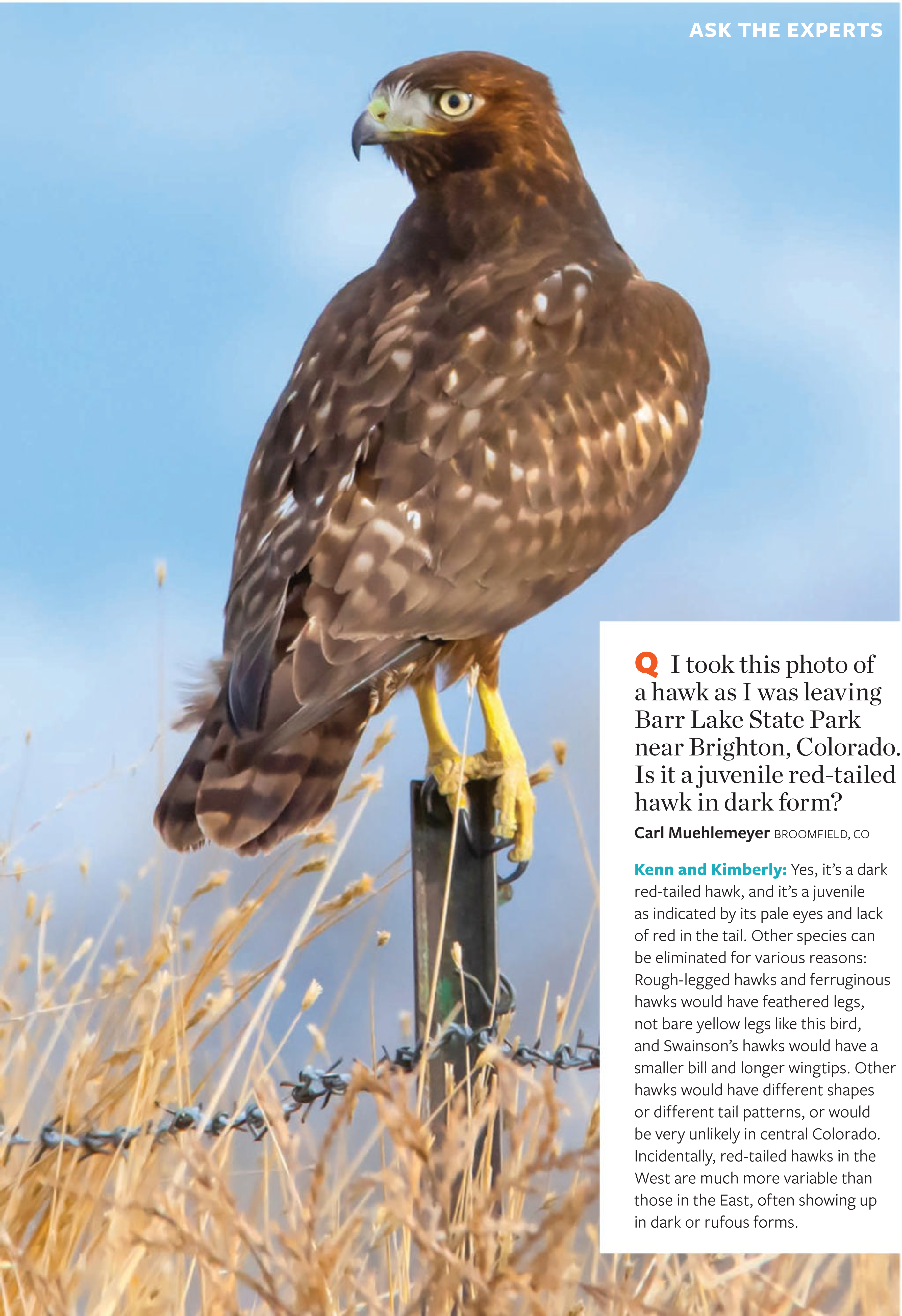
Q Do you have any tips for helping dipladenia (mandevilla) plants grow inside? **Darlene Collins** BATAVIA, NY

Melinda: It is possible to overwinter dipladenias indoors for winter. Prune the plant back by about halfway to make it easier to fit your indoor growing space. Set it in a sunny window and use artificial lights if needed to boost the amount of light the plant receives. The plant may drop leaves as it adapts from the outdoor growing conditions to the more challenging indoor environment.

Water the soil thoroughly whenever the top few inches begin to dry. Pour off excess water or place a few pebbles in the saucer. Make sure the pot sits on top of the pebbles above the water to prevent root rot. This extra humidity helps all indoor plants tolerate the dry air. Do not fertilize yet. Prune the plant back and begin fertilizing in late February or early March to give it a good head start on the summer flowering season.

I have also had success overwintering these plants in a cool, dark area in my basement. Cut the plant back to about 12 inches and water just enough to prevent the roots from desiccating. Move the plant to a warm sunny location in late winter and begin watering to encourage growth. Then start fertilizing when new growth appears, and move it outside once the danger of frost has passed.

MANDEVILLA: NENOV/GETTY IMAGES



Q I took this photo of a hawk as I was leaving Barr Lake State Park near Brighton, Colorado. Is it a juvenile red-tailed hawk in dark form?

Carl Muehlemeyer BROOMFIELD, CO

Kenn and Kimberly: Yes, it's a dark red-tailed hawk, and it's a juvenile as indicated by its pale eyes and lack of red in the tail. Other species can be eliminated for various reasons: Rough-legged hawks and ferruginous hawks would have feathered legs, not bare yellow legs like this bird, and Swainson's hawks would have a smaller bill and longer wingtips. Other hawks would have different shapes or different tail patterns, or would be very unlikely in central Colorado. Incidentally, red-tailed hawks in the West are much more variable than those in the East, often showing up in dark or rufous forms.

Holiday cactus

Q My holiday cactus doesn't bloom. What am I doing wrong?

Jean Flook WATERFORD, PA

Melinda: These plants bloom in their native habitat when weather is cooler and drier. Mimicking these conditions helps encourage flowering. Cover or move your cactus to a totally dark location for 14 hours each night, and uncover or move it back in the sunlight each day. Allow the soil to go a bit drier and place it in an area where night temperatures are cooler. Start doing this around Oct. 1 for a holiday floral display.

FROM LEFT: ANDREA JONES/GAP PHOTOS; YEONGSIK IM/GETTY IMAGES

Satsuki azalea

Q I inherited a Satsuki azalea in my Zone 6 yard, but the plant is listed as Zone 7. The past two winters have been mild, but how do I protect it during a typical cold winter?

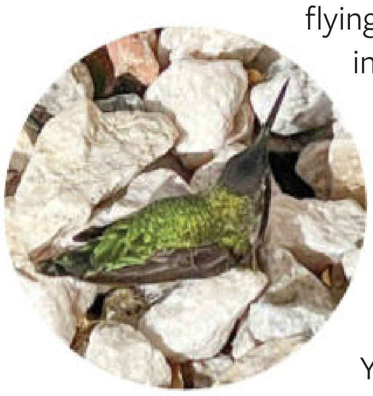
Juli Seyfried GROVE CITY, OH

Melinda: Proper care throughout the season is the first step to boosting winter hardiness of any plant. Continue to water your Satsuki azalea as needed throughout the fall season. Spread a 2-to-3-inch layer of wood chips or shredded bark over the soil surface. Pull the mulch back from the stems to reduce the risk of rot. Satsuki are typically evergreen and benefit from protection from drying winter wind and sun. Put up a burlap screen or wrap the stems in burlap if the plants are susceptible to damage from snow loads. All of this helps reduce the risk of winter damage.

Q I saw this hummingbird on the ground in my backyard, and it didn't fly away until I was quite close. Is this normal?

Patrice Caden SUN CITY WEST, AZ

Kenn and Kimberly: If the bird was close to the house, it might have been temporarily stunned after flying into a window. But if it was clear out in the open, it could have been something more random. Sometimes we will see a hummer just sitting still in an odd place, as if the little dynamo had suddenly run out of energy, and it may be several minutes before it perks up and flies away. But they don't normally rest on the ground. Your bird was a male Costa's hummingbird or Anna's hummingbird—we can't see quite enough detail in the photo to be sure which.



Q When I returned home after being away for much of December, my potted lavender's flowers and most of the leaves were gone except for some small green leaves on the stalks. Can it be saved?

Chiyoko Gussin EUREKA, CA

Melinda: The new leaves are a good sign that the plant survived your absence. Provide the care you normally give your lavender during the winter. Water thoroughly as needed, and wait until spring to begin fertilizing. You can remove any brown brittle stems above the new growth at the base of the plant. Fortunately, regular pruning encourages leafy growth and discourages development of woody stems and floppy growth that is much less attractive.

Q I use red and white oak wood for heat. I find worms or larvae under the bark, so I remove them and offer them to the birds. Titmice, chickadees and hermit thrushes love them! What could these worms be?

Jill Donaldson LANCASTER, VA

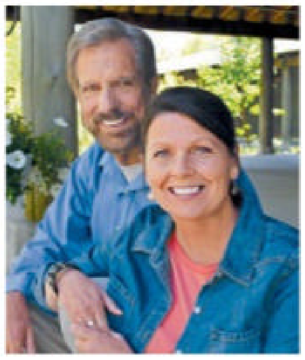
Kenn and Kimberly: Various kinds of insects tunnel under the bark of oak trees, but the most common ones are larvae of beetles, especially bark beetles, long-horned wood borers (named for the long antennae of adults) and metallic wood borers. Some of these larvae may tunnel through the wood or stay under the bark for several years before they emerge in the adult stage. Removing them from your firewood and feeding them to birds seems like a reasonable approach. **NOTE:** It's important to source your firewood from local sources to avoid the spread of invasive insect pests.

Q My indoor Meyer lemon tree keeps being infested with scale. How can I control it? I've been using alcohol on cotton swabs to remove the insects.

Douglas Ekholm LANSING, MI

Melinda: Scale is a common problem on indoor citrus. Isolate the scale-infested trees from the rest of your plants. Flake the scale off the leaves and stems using your fingernail, soft-bristled toothbrush or similar item. This removes the adult scale but also allows you to better monitor the plants for any missed insects and future outbreaks. A horticulture oil such as Summit Year-Round Spray Oil and insecticidal soap are organic options. Oils kill all stages of this insect, while the insecticidal soap only kills immature crawlers before they develop their hard covering. These insecticides only kill the insects they contact, so repeat treatments will be needed. As always, read and follow label directions to achieve the best results.

MEET THE EXPERTS



Kimberly and Kenn Kaufman are the duo behind the Kaufman Field Guide *series. They speak and lead bird trips all over the world.*

Melinda Myers is a nationally known, award-winning garden expert, TV and radio host, and author of more than 20 books.

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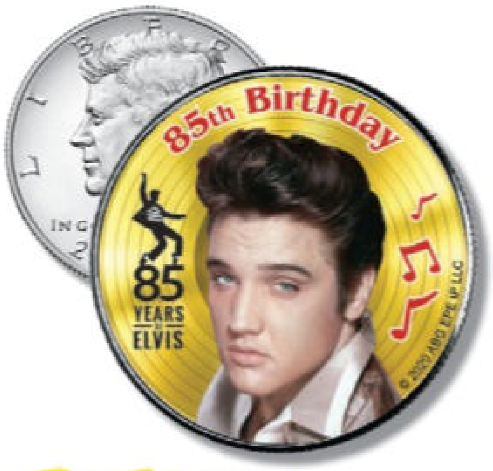

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Barn owl

All About Owl Pellets

And why you should give a hoot about them

BY PURBITA SAHA

A tight ball of fur and bones lies in the leaf litter under the evergreens—a telltale sign that an owl is nearby. The nocturnal raptors cough up these grisly artifacts at their roosts once a day. After snatching up a rodent or fellow bird, they swallow their prey whole, squeezing together the indigestible bits in their gizzard and discarding what's called a pellet. Or in other words, owl puke.

Birds such as hawks, kites, herons and cormorants can cast pellets too, says Eres Gomez, the research coordinator for the Urban Bird Project in San Antonio, Texas. But owls make a habit of it, given their fuzzy, crunchy diets. In fact, you might be able to identify the exact species based on the contents of a pellet. "Small owls such as the elf owl mostly eat insects, so their pellets are generally drier and more compact. They also may be differently colored than the pellets of owls that eat rodents, which are usually brown or gray, like the fur of their prey," explains Nicholas Lund, advocacy and outreach manager for Maine Audubon and author of the *Birdist* blog.

And there are other clues hidden in the indigestible treasures beyond "who's who." Both Eres and Nicholas note that pellets can be invaluable for studying food availability and the well-being of individual birds. "We can learn a lot from looking specifically at the bones, especially the skull, which can help identify which exact rodent, reptile, amphibian or bird species was last consumed by that owl," Eres says. "It can also give an understanding of a raptor's relative abundance" or "shed light on forest health" through comparison, Nicholas

BARN OWL: CHRISTOPHER CHAMBERS, OWL PELLET: MYIMAGES - MICHA/SHUTTERSTOCK (2)

says. "Are there fewer of a certain prey item in one location or another? How can owls of the same species survive in different habitats by varying their diets?"

While you'd need to be an expert to probe the big conservation questions, anyone can dissect owl pellets to grow their fascination with the natural world. You just have to know how to source them, says Eres. "It's extremely difficult to find them in the wild, even for biologists and researchers who strategically search for them. You'd be lucky if you did." For the best results, comb the ground under active roosting sites or nest boxes. You can pinpoint a spot by listening for calls and looking for whitewash (owl poop) on tree trunks. Just be sure to give the birds a wide berth and leave the area undisturbed, especially in breeding season.

If you're having a tough time scrounging for pellets outdoors, it's perfectly OK to order them online. Eres recommends using a reputable vendor that collects them from captive animals (usually barn owls) at zoos or rehabilitation centers and sanitizes the pieces so they're safe to handle. Host a pellet party for your birding family and friends, and repurpose the morbid bounty for jewelry, decorations or art. Over time, you'll get better at reading the bones and recognizing one owl's telltale vomit from another.

Purbita Saha is a science journalist and birder in New Jersey. Long-eared owls are one of her biggest nemeses, and she thinks Owl Puke is a great name for a death metal band.

IS IT LEGAL TO OWN OWL PELLETS?

Under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, it's illegal to gather, buy or sell owl parts in the United States and Canada. That includes feathers and bones—but not pellets because they're largely made up of other animals. Businesses that produce consumer-grade pellets need a permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to handle birds, wild or captive. Some states also have specific permits for scientists, educators and other professionals, so remember to check the local laws before going on a collecting spree.

Owl pellet

> This great horned owl had a nest in the cemetery in Old Saybrook, Connecticut, and one day, I saw it sitting in a tree near the nest with its tongue out. Maybe it was getting ready to disgorge a pellet!"
>
> **Martin Espinola**
> WINDSOR LOCKS, CT

What bird do you wish would visit your backyard?

Hopeful readers reveal the feathered guests that would make their dreams come true

Seeing a **painted bunting** would be such a delight! Their fun colors remind me of a child's drawing. **Monica Partington** RALEIGH, NC

I wish we could get **northern cardinals** in Washington like those my family sees in Tennessee. **John Dacquisto** KINGSTON, WA

Cedar waxwings—they're so beautiful, yet apparently elusive! **Faith Welch** JOHNSTON, RI

Cedar waxwing

I miss seeing the vibrant **scarlet tanagers** that I used to see when I was a kid in Illinois. **Stephen Johnson** MADISON, WI

Purple martins used to come to my nest boxes every year. I haven't seen them for almost three seasons. I often wonder why and wish they would return.

David Budda DRIFTON, PA

Every autumn, I am captivated by migrating **turkey vultures** descending to roost in my city's trees. It would be an honor if these silent soaring wonders would pick my yard to roost in.

Trina Jones LANCASTER, CA

YOUR TURN!

Q: Annuals or perennials: Which do you prefer, and why?

Share your answer with us at *birdsandblooms.com/submit.*

PURPLE MARTIN: AGAMI PHOTO AGENCY/SHUTTERSTOCK; CEDAR WAXWING: LORRAINEHUDGINS/GETTY IMAGES

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12. Not applicable
13. Publication title:
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14. Issue date for circulation data below:
    August/September 2024
15. Extent and nature of circulation:

	Average no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months	No. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date
a. Total no. copies (net press run)	699,705	660,641
b. Paid circulation		
1. Mailed outside-county paid subscriptions	645,813	615,042
2. Mailed in-county paid subscriptions	0	0
3. Paid distribution outside the mails, including sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, counter sales and other paid distribution outside the USPS	12,611	11,150
4. Paid distribution by other classes of mail through the USPS	0	0
c. Total paid distribution (sum of 15b1, 2, 3 and 4)	658,424	626,192
d. Free or nominal rate distribution		
1. Outside-county copies	22,054	16,127
2. In-county copies	0	0
3. Copies mailed at other classes through the USPS	0	0
4. Distribution outside the mail	0	0
e. Total free or nominal rate distribution (sum of 15d1, 2, 3 and 4)	22,054	16,127
f. Total distribution (sum of 15c and 15e)	680,478	642,319
g. Copies not distributed	19,227	18,322
h. Total (sum of 15f and 15g)	699,705	660,641
i. Percent paid (15c divided by 15f times 100)	96.76%	97.49%
16. Electronic Copy Circulation		
a. Paid Electronic Copies	32,967	42,800
b. Total Paid Print Copies (Line 15c) + Paid Electronic Copies (Line 16a)	691,391	668,992
c. Total Print Distribution (Line 15f) + Paid Electronic Copies (Line 16a)	713,445	685,119
d. Percent paid (Both Print & Electronic Copies) (16b divided by 16c times 100)	96.91%	97.65%

17. This statement of ownership will be printed in the December/January 2025 issue of this publication.
18. I certify that all information furnished on this form is true and complete. I understand that anyone who furnishes false or misleading information on this form or who omits material or information requested on the form may be subject to criminal sanctions (including fines and imprisonment) and/or civil sanctions (including civil penalties).

Signature: Adam Vanderhoef, Senior Manager, Magazine Planning

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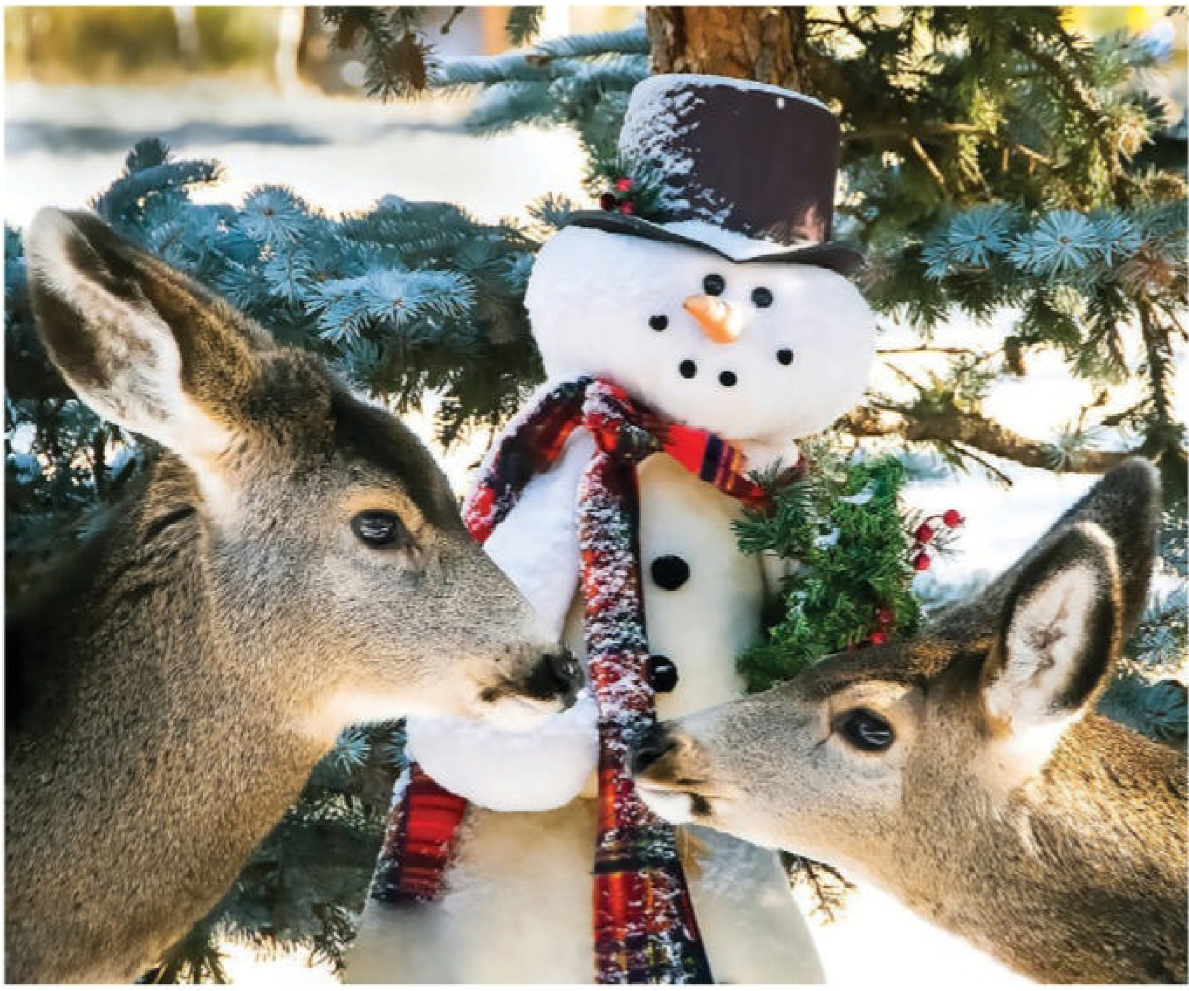


Caption This!

Frosty sets the scene for a friendly meet up

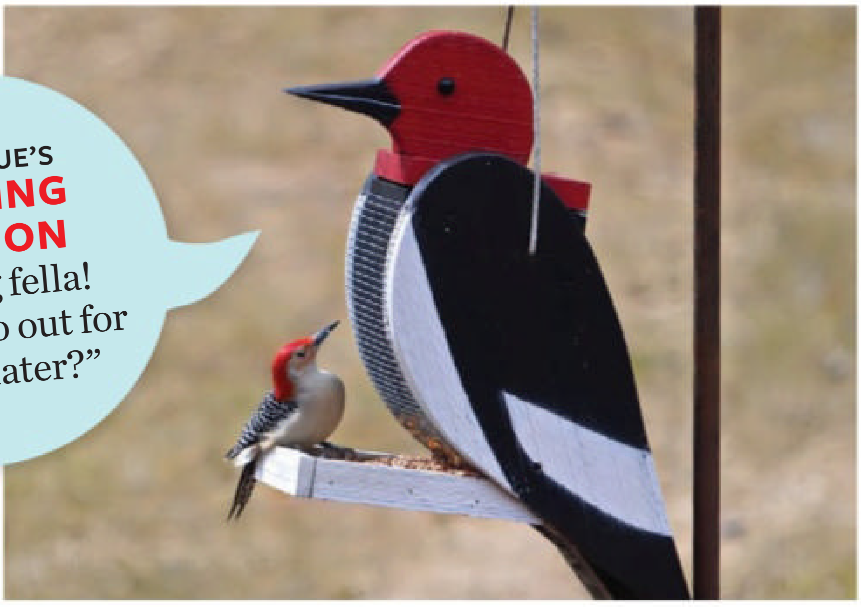
Jamie Johnston of Woodland Park, Colorado, said it seemed as if these deer were going in for a kiss in front of a seasonally attired snowman.

SHARE YOUR CAPTION

Your funny caption for this wildlife scene could appear in the next issue. Share your clever idea at *birdsandblooms.com/caption.*

LAST ISSUE'S **WINNING CAPTION**

"Hey big fella! Want to go out for drinks later?"



Caption submitted by Brian Marchant of Wade, Maine.

RED-BELLIED WOODPECKER: WALTER VOGT

SHARE YOUR BEST FUNNY NATURE PHOTOS!

Follow the Submission Guidelines on page 64.

Find the Hummingbird

In each issue, we hide a hummingbird like the one above left. Enter to win at *birdsandblooms.com/contests* if you find it. Winners get a one-year subscription to *Birds & Blooms*. In the Oct/Nov issue, we hid it on page 37.

HIDDEN OBJECT GUIDELINES
No purchase necessary to enter to win. Purchase will not improve your chances of winning. Sweepstakes is open to legal residents age 18 years or older of the U.S., its territories and possessions, or of Canada (excluding the Province of Quebec). Sweepstakes begins on Nov. 20, 2024, and ends on March 18, 2025. Visit *birdsandblooms.com/contests* for official rules. VOID WHERE PROHIBITED. Sweepstakes sponsored by RDA Enthusiast Brands, LLC.

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Submission Guidelines

We love hearing from you—in fact, we couldn't publish this magazine without you!

To share stories, photos, backyard tips, questions for our experts or other content, use the form at *birdsandblooms.com/submit* and follow the online instructions.

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Field Editors

Find content from these field editors in this issue:

Juli Seyfried

Volunteer nature lovers from across the U.S. and Canada belong to our *Birds & Blooms* Field Editor family. They share tips, stories, photos and happenings from their very own backyards, neighborhoods and regions.

Birds&Blooms

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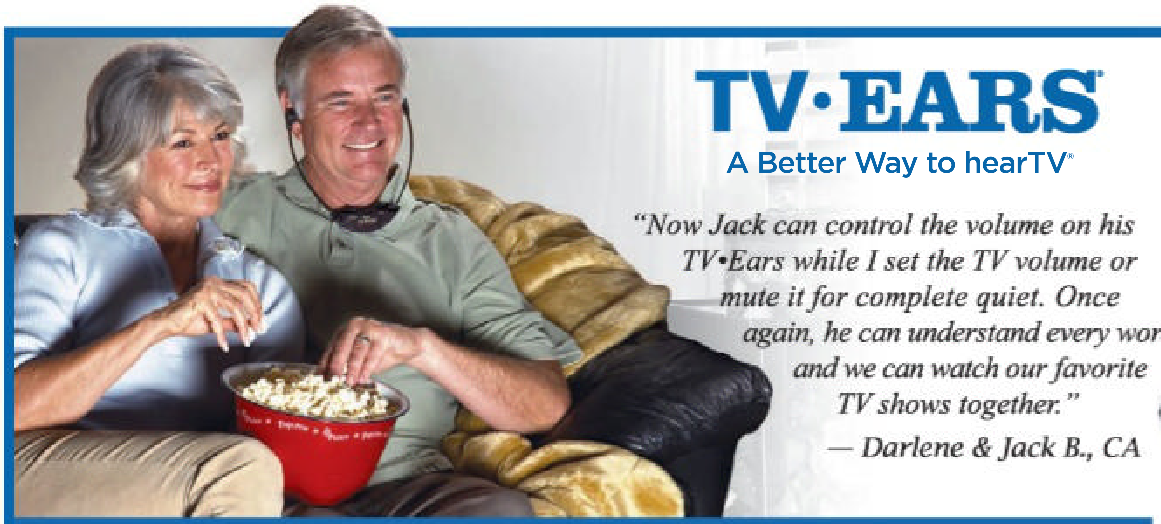

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DID YOU KNOW?

Privy to Poinsettias

Discover the past and present of this holiday staple

BY ERICA BROWNE GRIVAS

More than 100 varieties of poinsettias are available, and breeders create more colors and sizes all the time. You can find plants in shades of red, pink, yellow, cream and white, which can be solid, striped or stippled, and even with varied leaf colors.

1828 The explorer U.S. Ambassador Joel Roberts Poinsett introduced the plant to the U.S. in 1828 after seeing it used ceremonially by friars in Mexico. However, Poinsett was a slave owner, and some are calling for a name change, suggesting the traditional Aztec name be used instead to reflect its Indigenous origins, or the scientific name *Euphorbia pulcherrima*.

1 During the winter holiday season, more poinsettias are sold than any other potted plant the rest of the year, making it the top-selling potted plant in the United States, with about $200 million in sales annually.

10 While you may know it as a tabletop plant, only 1 or 2 feet high, in the sunshine of Mexico, it can reach 10 feet tall.

14 In the 14th century, the Aztecs of Mexico used poinsettia, called *cuetlaxóchitl*, in many ways. They used the bracts as paint for rituals and dyes and the sap medicinally to treat fevers. Note that the sap can be a skin irritant.

14 Poinsettias require 14 hours of total darkness daily before bracts turn color, appearing to bloom.

LEENA ROBINSON/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

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> “May the wind under your wings bear you where the sun sails and the moon walks.”
>
> *—J.R.R. Tolkien*

Blue jay by
Andy Raupp
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